

剣使徒の神姫さまよう

デュエリスト

すえばしけん

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2



ファンタジア文庫

Samayou Shinki no Duelist

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by Suebashi Ken

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まったく気配を感じさせず、
ただ『殺す』こと
そのみに特化した——暗殺術

幕「光」の行方
第二階段、解放
黒死小刀

ユウキ
貧乏商店のオーナーで
ティナの雇い主
——元・剣使徒の少年

Preface

A boy who had once been solely a tool for murder.

The first time he smiled was about a month after we first met.

The two of us having newly arrived in this world, we sought to gain a greater understanding of the labyrinth – the Magna PortaGreat Gate. To that end, we hid our identities and ventured forth.

One day, we happened upon an untried adventurer, under attack by a Void Beast, whom we saved. He thanked us endlessly, and as we saw him off, I turned back to look – the edges of the boy’s lips had curled just a little.

“...You just smiled!”

“...”

The smile disappeared, and he watched me in confusion.

“I guess you weren’t aware of it, huh? Well then, what you just felt right here——”

I tapped him on the chest.

“That is a ‘sprout.’”

“A ‘sprout’?”

“Yes, the sprout of feeling. You need to nourish it and help it grow.”

“Grow?”

He looked even more confused than he’d been a moment ago.

His expression was so adorable I laughed aloud.

From that day on, we put an end to many Void Beasts, saving countless lives in the process. The people gave the boy the name “Snow Blade King,” and he was revered as a hero.

——That was the moment where it all began, when a “tool” took its first step toward becoming a “human.”

From that time forward, the two of us continued forward, together.

Unbound, as we were, by the chains of time, we truly believed those blessed, joyful days would never end.

——What fools we were.

Prologue

“Well, work is work,” the dark-skinned young man – Jahar – said with a smile. “——It’s just that, to be honest, this is a bit of a pain, you know?”

Deep within a temple of the Shinki, in a section cut off from the rest of the world, was a room with a throne.

Currently, this room held three people: the master of the room and her attendant, as well as a visitor, Jahar.

“While the reward is certainly great, would you mind sharing with me the ‘reason this has to be done,’ O ‘Shinki who Scatters the Stars’?”

“The reason? ‘Because it’s necessary’ – is that reason not good enough for you?”

“Necessary according to whom?”

“The world.”

“...Explain.”

“There’s no need for you to know any more than that, Duelist of the Moon,” the girl seated on the throne answered calmly.

She looked to be about fifteen, and boasted a sort of prim beauty, as well as an air of haughty willfulness.

“Both the reward and the task itself are beneficial to your master, the ‘Shinki Crowned with the Moon.’ You’re nothing more than a pet – for you to insinuate that there’s more to my goodwill than appears is the height of arrogance.”

“As luck would have it, I happen to be something of a wild dog that delights in biting people. Manners and what have you – I’ve never bothered with those things.”

Jahar's light tone seemed strange given the Shinki's contemptuous tone – if he hadn't also pulled the huge red claymore from his shoulder. The atmosphere quickly grew tense——

“I'm hoping that comment about biting was just an analogy, Jahar-san, because if you really tried anything like that, I'd have to respond in kind.”

The words were intermingled with a dry laugh.

Alongside the “Shinki who Scatters the Stars,” Elfriede, stood an upright young man. A quick glance revealed him to be unarmed, and not the slightest hint of bloodlust could be felt from him.

“Anyway, it'll be quite problematic if you take everything Elfriede-sama says seriously. The way she speaks is rather biting; there's something seriously wrong with her personality. Even if what she says makes you mad, don't take it to heart.”

“Is that so? You see, the problem is that I'm the kind of person who takes everything to heart; I'm quite fond of heart-to-hearts, you know? If you ask me, that way of doing things is a bit easier on me.”

“That makes things a bit harder on me then, Duelist of the Moon. ——Also, Kai – shut your mouth.”

“As you say. My apologies,” the man said with a smile.

“If you agree to my request, then you will be amply rewarded with either money or Reliquia according to your preference. Moreover, I will aid you in restoring the Moon's Oath Legion, which in turn, will allow you to gather divine energy once more. What do you say? Will you help?”

Elfriede smiled.

“I will, but I have to ask – what do you stand to gain from all this?”

“I would prefer to avoid a direct confrontation with the other Shinki at all cost. An alliance is rather beneficial in that sense. ——In any event,

accomplishing the task I have set before you benefits you more than anyone else.”

“...The problem is my Shinki. I can’t see her liking this, and convincing her will be problematic.”

“That’s not my concern, now is it? If you refuse now, then our relationship ends here. Forget the reward, your position will be a very dangerous one.”

“...”

“On the other hand, if you do this thing, then I will continue to protect both you and your Shinki, even though it must be said that we will eventually become enemies sooner or later. —Now then, consider this: do you two really have the leeway to turn me down?”

Elfriede’s expression revealed a confident expression befitting the one holding all the cards.

“To be honest... no.”

Jahar shrugged.

Although he wasn’t happy to admit it, the fact of the matter was that her words were indeed irrefutable.

“You’re much more suited to the struggle for victory than my Kaya-chan. If we were partnered together, then my chances would be so much better.”

“If you ever feel like leaving behind that crybaby and coming over to this side, I’d be happy to welcome you. A Duelist’s power is to be appreciated.”

“Then what about me...?” Kai asked with a stiff smile.

Elfriede watched her Duelist through slanted eyes.

“...Unfortunately, Duelists can’t be swapped. Just focus on protecting me, Kai; I know better than to expect anything more from you.”

“Alright, alright. I understand,” he replied.

“When it comes to switching sides, you’ll have to give me some time to think.”

Jahar flipped his hair back as he spoke.

“Nonetheless, I’ll take the job. Our interests happen to coincide this time, after all.”

“Is that so? I’ll leave it to you, then. ——Repeat our request in full once more, if you would, Kai.”

“Very well. According to the information shared by the ‘Shinki Crowned with the Moon’ and her Duelist, the former Duelist known as the Snow Blade King as well as the Sixth Shinki, of ambiguous origin, now reside within the city. With regards to the aforementioned parties, the ‘Shinki who Scatters the Stars’ requests the following of the ‘Shinki Crowned with the Moon.’”

Kai paused for a second before continuing.

“You will execute both Yuuki Takamigahara and Albertina at any cost.”

Chapter 1: The Saplings Experience the Labyrinth



Lost to the world of dreams, the young girl's quiet breathing was steady.

She looked to be not-quite fifteen, and boasted a head of luxurious golden hair. She was quite cute, really. Her face revealed an expression of absolute fulfillment; her journey through Morpheus' realm had made her jubilant indeed.

At her side was a young man with arms crossed, watching her wordlessly.

He looked to be about twenty, and was slightly taller than average, with black hair.

After some time, the young man – Yuuki – sighed.

The girl was lazily asleep atop the store counter, where a puddle of her drool had collected. He'd entrusted the store to her before heading out; it was immediately clear to him that she hadn't been the least useful while he was gone.

“...Hey, Tina. ALBERTINA.”



“Hmm...?”

The girl yawned languidly.

“How was the store? The store!”

Reaching out, he gave her a light shake.

This time she yawned and muttered something incomprehensible. She didn’t appear to have truly awoken.

“...”

Yuuki thought for a moment before leaning in near her ears and inhaling deeply.

“WAKE UP——”

“Eh? ...Wha? Oh, it’s morning!”

The small head raised sharply, crashing directly into Yuuki’s chin.

“...Sorry about that, Master.”

Tina was seated at the dinner table, her body bent as she pleaded forgiveness.

“I didn’t mean any harm. I was just woken up so suddenly, you know...”

“——Your head slamming into me I can forgive,” Yuuki said, as he rubbed his chin unhappily. “However, what I can’t forgive is the way you simply ignored your store duties. Weren’t you the one who told me that you could handle things over here? In fact, weren’t you looking at me with an expression that said not to look down on you even as you swore you would take care of things?”

“Uh...”

“If all that happened was that we missed out on some potential customers, then that’s one thing. The bigger issue is that there have been many thieves and other unscrupulous adventurers on the prowl recently. What would you do if our merchandise had been stolen?”

“Umm...”

“If such a thing were to happen, we’d be out several hundred, if not several thousand, denar. Even if you didn’t eat or drink for a month or two, that wouldn’t be enough to cover the cost.”

“Ohh...”

“Anyway, what did you mean by ‘Oh, it’s morning!’? Most people sleep at night, wake up in the morning, and work during the day. It’s the middle of the day right now – you should be hard at work.”

“Um, well... It’s that, you know? ——It’s because you’re my sun.”

“...What?”

“Oh, my love! Each time we meet, every time I see your face, it’s as if the night has broken at last and the dawn has come!”

“...”

Yuuki frowned.

“I’ve always thought you were pretty weird, but I guess you’ve finally gone over the deep end?”

“No good, huh?”

Tina looked gravely disappointed.

“But those were such stirring lines in the story...”

“Story...?”

“Yeah, I borrowed a book from Franka. I guess it’s what you’d call a romance novel? It was super interesting, you know; I read it all in one go without even sleeping!”

“...And there we have it. It all makes sense now.”

Yuuki collapsed lifelessly atop the table.

“Oh, forget it. It’s a waste of energy getting mad at you. Let’s eat.”

“Ooh, sounds good to me. Tina’s more than happy to help out. Eating is definitely one of life’s great joys – a moment of joyous, radiant light.”

At Tina’s overjoyed reaction, Yuuki could only sigh once more.

“——To be honest, compared with the current situation, the thing with the store is really of little consequence.”

“Hmm? I don’t really quite get it. Why don’t you explain further? The ‘Shinki who Dwells in the City,’ Albertina, will be happy to advise you on your worries.”

Tina stuck her chest out proudly.

“Sure, why not? Let’s talk.”

“Right, right.”

“Right now, I find myself in pretty dire financial straits. To be blunt, business is poor.”

“You shouldn’t aim at changing your fortunes in a single night. It doesn’t matter whether it be the size of your business, your skill as a merchant, or anything else, really – that applies to everything. You’re worrying too much, Master. You need to face life’s problems one step at a time.”

“The thing is, if we continue down this path, then starting from tomorrow, I’m going to have to ration our food portions to a third of their current size.”

“TODAY! WE NEED TO FIX THIS TODAY!” Tina shouted in a panic.

“It’s because I don’t know how to fix it that we’re in this problem in the first place.”

“H-How... No, calm down, CALM DOWN, Master! H-How did things become like this?!”

“You’re the one who needs to calm down. ———Anyway, to answer your question, it’s simple – we’ve spent all our money. Moreover, today, taxes are due, which pretty much leaves us penniless. This is all because of that incident. Just thinking of how much we wasted that time is painful.”

Yuuki was terribly dispirited.

“That’s why if we eat what little food we have left, we’ll simply starve. ———Or wait, actually, you should be fine; you’re a Shinki, after all.”

“N-No one’s going to be fine! Even if I can’t actually starve, I get hungry just like anyone else. It’s too hard, Master! Too hard!”

“Yeah, it’s definitely hard on me.”

“...”

“...”

“...Is there no other way? What can we do?”

“Weren’t you the one giving advice here? ——Well, if we can somehow sell everything that’s up for sale, then we ought to be good for a while longer, but only a month at most. The problem is, we’d then have to close up shop, which would kill our income. It’s a real conundrum.”

Yuuki managed a small store for adventurers, the “Shoppe Boris.” Because he’d inherited it from its former owner, an old man, its name was unchanged.

The store carried several types of merchandise such as Reliquia, those mysterious tools which housed divine energy, weapons and armor, and various medicinal items like herbs and bandages. In short, the tools of the trade for an adventurer.

Even if medicinal herbs and the like were something he could gather on his own, but without any spare capital, there wasn’t much he could do about procuring any other goods, particularly Reliquia. If things continued, circumstances might force the closure of his store not long from now.

“I’ve got it, Master! Why don’t you just venture into the labyrinth and bring us back some high-grade Reliquia? With your skills and a celestial Dragon Fang weapon in your hands, even the lower levels should pose no threat _____”

“No thanks,” Yuuki replied sternly.

“W-Why not?”

“First of all, I’m just a ninth-ranked adventurer. If I were to walk around with such a high-grade Reliquia weapon, then people would be very suspicious of how I got it. Even if I were to try and sell it, people would either turn me down outright or, suspecting I obtained it via illicit means, intentionally lowball me. ——Do you really want to raise questions about our true identity?”

“Oh...”

“Secondly, and most importantly – I don’t want to.”

Tina frowned, sure she’d misheard.

“...Say that again?”

“To put it simply, if the store is to do any better, I want it to be because of my mercantile skill. If I have to rely on the strength of a celestial Dragon Fang weapon to keep us afloat, then it’s entirely meaningless. After what happened last time, I’ve determined I need to increase my skills yet further.”

“You’re stubborn about the strangest things...” Tina said worriedly.

“Seriously, how could there be a Duelist who’d let their Shinki go hungry?!”

“I’m not a normal Duelist, you know? ——Anyway, when it comes to the store, I’m the master here, and you’re just a salesclerk. Shouldn’t you be following your boss’ orders?”

“If the store owner’s command is to ‘starve,’ then any employee would mutiny.”

“...”

“...”

The two began a staring contest as the atmosphere grew tense.

“...The Shinki Albertina commands you – bring forth the food!”

“The fact that I can’t do that is the reason we’re worrying about this in the first place.”

“It’s not that you can’t do anything about it! It’s that you won’t——”

“Um...”

The pair shut up as a voice called out from the entrance to the store.

A familiar young girl stood there, watching them.

“Although the store’s open, I didn’t see any customers and I thought I heard you guys inside... Are you busy?”

“Oh, no. Did you need to make a purchase, Franka?”

“Oh, it’s nothing like that. I just happened to get some fruits and veggies from my neighbors. I can’t finish them on my own, so I thought I’d drop by and share some with you.”

“A Goddess!”

Tina’s eyes shined as she shouted, surprising Franka.

“A Goddess has descended, Master!”

Aren’t you the Goddess here? Yuuki thought, though he kept the thought to himself, expressing instead his sincere gratitude for Franka’s generosity.

Solitus.

This empty world, encroached upon by “The Devourer,” consisted of a single city.

This city had been constructed in honor of deity: the Heavenly King, who orchestrated all things, as well as his five subordinate Shinki – the “Shinki who Supports the Sky,” the “Shinki who Raises the Sun,” the “Shinki

Crowned with the Moon,” the “Shinki who Scatters the Stars,” and the “Shinki who Guards the Earth.”

Below the city was a labyrinth of unknown depth, the Magna PortaGreat Gate.

In order to obtain that mystery of mysteries, the tools which held within them divine energy – Reliquia – those with confidence in their own prowess challenged the labyrinth day and night.

There were those who dreamed of instant wealth.

Others sought to demonstrate their faith in the Shinki.

Others still had no higher goal than to ease the aching of their bellies.

——Adventurers.

One day, the adventurer Yuuki Takamagihara had stumbled upon, and taken in, a young girl who’d fainted deep within the labyrinth.

Her name was Albertina.

——An existence which should not exist – the sixth Shinki of five.

“Wow, that’s definitely rough.”

Once they’d finished lunch, Franka heard them out over tea, and expressed her wholehearted sympathy.

She was fairly tall, with a full figure. The expression on her face gave one a rather cute, if slightly shy, impression.

She was a frequent customer of Yuuki’s store, as well as an adventurer with a bright future. On her sixteenth birthday, several days before, she’d finally attained the qualifications for a third-rank. It was an astounding deed given her age.

She was an amazing individual even when it came to other aspects of her life. The lunch they'd just finished had been prepared by Franka using the vegetables she'd brought with her as well as some salted pork. Not only had it tasted great, but she'd done a fantastic job of cleaning up afterward as well. Yuuki simply couldn't compare.

"If there's anything I can do to help..."

"You've already done more than enough. I'm grateful for your concern, really, but this is something I need to take care of on my own. If there's one thing you can do, it's simply to keep on buying what you need as a customer. Are you okay on Divine Pearls?"

"Yep. It's something clerics need to pay special attention to, after all," Franka said with a smile. Frantically, she added, "Oh, but if I ever need more, I'll be sure to buy them here. Definitely."

Clerics were one type of adventurer. They utilized divine energy for offensive, defensive, and restorative Orisons. They used the Reliquia known as Divine Pearls – crystals formed from the source which powered all miracles – to power their skills.

"That reminds me, Yuuki-san. I haven't seen you around the school recently... Are you still taking a break from things? Or rather, is it because of this financial trouble that you've been too busy to come?"

Solitus was home to several adventurer training schools.

Yuuki and Franka were both advanced class students, and he was also employed by the school as an assistant instructor for the beginning class from time to time.

However, as Franka had just described, of late, he had neither attended class nor taken any part-time jobs from the school.

"Yeah... Some things have come up, so I've been busy."

Truth be told, her guess had been spot on, but he felt too embarrassed to admit as much, and so he held his silence.

“On that note, there was a post about an offer for job. The task is to escort the students of the beginning class around the first few floors of the labyrinth. They’re looking for a party with experience.”

“They’re recruiting? That’s rare. Don’t they usually just give those jobs directly to school-affiliated parties?”

“Yeah, but there was that huge incident just recently, right? Many people who were caught up in it haven’t yet made a full recovery, and so they’re short on people.”

“I see...”

Monsters of countless types and shapes, known as Void Beasts, resided within the Magna PortaGreat Gate. Each floor was an ecosystem of its own, and generally speaking, Void Beasts never ventured past the limits of their natural habitats. However, a month ago, a large and terrible Void Beast had suddenly appeared in the upper levels. Although the incident had eventually been resolved, numerous people had been wounded in the process.

Yuuki and company had happened to be in the vicinity at the time of the episode, and had gotten drawn in. In fact, the cause of the predicament he now found himself in was none other than that very incident.

“The pay looks pretty good, so what do you think? Plus, the kids are still young, but they’re future adventurers. If you develop a good relationship with them now, they might just become your customers in the future. ——A- Also, if I might, I’d like to take part as well; I’ll ask Master too.”



“Sure.”

The training school was quite generous – not only would they cover any and all expenses incurred, but they’d pay out immediately after the task was done.

He was hesitant to leave the store unmanned, but this was a real opportunity.

“I’ll definitely give it some consideration,” he said at last.

“Nice!” Franka whispered, clenching her fists in victory.

“Fruits, veggies, and oooh, cheese! This will definitely do for now. This is great, simply great. A real savior, she is.”

After Franka had departed, Tina picked over the food she’d left behind with a radiant smile.

“How unlike a certain Shinki that comes to mind.”

“...Even the Shinki have things they can’t do.”

In this city of Solitus, the five Shinki were objects of reverent worship.

The barriers they maintained halted the advance of The Devourer, and the power of miracles they wielded both held natural disasters at bay as well as ensured a favorable climate for agriculture. Simply put, they were directly responsible for providing humanity somewhere to live.

Divine energy was the source of their power, which they gathered by breaking down Reliquia and absorbing their stored energy directly.

As the result of certain events, Yuuki found himself unexpectedly caring for this young girl who possessed the power of the Shinki – the sixth of five. However, her store of energy was almost completely gone, and she had no subordinates, and as such, was essentially incapable of using her powers.

In any case, Yuuki had no desire to rely on the powers of the Shinki to pour life into his floundering business. This was a burden he had to carry alone.

“So Master, what do you plan to do about the job Franka mentioned?”

“I’m going to take it. I need money, after all.”

“That’s great. I guess I can look forward to things improving then.”

Tina nodded spiritedly.

“Good luck, Master.”

“The way you speak... it’s almost like you have nothing to do with this. You’re coming too, you know?”

“——Wha?”

The Shinki blinked in shock.

“As you’re an employee of this store, it’s necessary for you to understand the adventurer life at least a little. This is a great opportunity to train both you and those beginning class brats at the same time. Training an employee is an employer’s duty, after all.”

“T-Tina’s no adventurer, though. If anything, I should simply be on the receiving end of adventurers’ efforts.”

Laying hold of Reliquia was no simple task. Generally speaking, they could only be found in either the lower levels or protected by Void Beasts. Bringing Reliquia back to the surface was an adventurer’s duty, the elite of whom would then offer these Reliquia to the Shinki.

Tina’s identity, however, was a secret from the public at large, and so there were none to make her offerings.

“Wait until someone’s actually willing to do that, *then* we can talk.”

“A-Also, you know as well as I do that I’m unsuited for raiding, Master! I can’t fight! I’m weak! It won’t take long before I can’t walk anymore and I’ll need you to carry me!”

“No need to worry about that. I’ll be more than happy to kick your lazy behind as many times as necessary to keep you moving along. ——Speaking of which, during the incident last month, you sure were proactive about venturing in yourself? What happened to all that motivation?”

“Oh, well uh, that was because of Franka...”

“And that’s exactly why it’s best to train yourself so you’ll be ready if anything happens, right?”

“Ugh...”

“That’s why I’m exercising my authority as the one who bought your body. You’re coming!”

“...I understand. I’ll go...”

Tina bowed her head dejectedly, seemingly resigned to her fate.

(——Everything else aside, the fact that she needs to train herself is certainly true.)

Her physique was frail even by the standards of girls her age, and utterly unsuited to physical labor. A simple trip to the mountains to gather herbs had left her so exhausted she’d been useless the rest of the day. It’d be bad if she was left like this.

Although if he had to be honest, his desire for her to accompany him had another reason behind it.

More specifically, he didn’t want her out of his sight if he could help it. If she wasn’t by his side, then he’d be unable to protect her.

The Church of the Five Holies taught that the Shinki were joined together in working to save humanity.

Unfortunately, this was a lie.

They were instead engaged in a savage, zero-sum free-for-all. As they were unable to harm one another directly, it instead became a proxy battle where one's subordinates were sent out to gather as many Reliquia as possible, both to one's benefit and to the others' detriment.

Only one would be allowed to ascend to the throne of the Heavenly King and lead humankind to salvation; only she who had forcefully suppressed her fellow Shinki would qualify.

Once a Shinki had perished, after a number of months or even years, another would be born in her place within the corresponding temple. As far as the public knew, the Shinki were immortal. The fact that there was an occasional changing of the guard was the greatest secret of the Church.

The sad truth was that these violent struggles to the death weren't actually all that uncommon.

With that said, it must be noted that the Shinki were instilled with an overpowering mental restriction against harming another individual. This sealed their ability to directly attack one another.

For that reason, the existences known as the Duelists served as both their sword and shield.

These Duelists were called forth from other worlds, and possessed frightening martial ability. They existed solely to fight on behalf of their respective Shinkis.

Each Shinki was allowed but a single Duelist; they were singular existences to the Shinki – lifelong servants and companions.

Summoning a Duelist to one's side was both the right of every Shinki as well as the first step for each newly born Shinki.

Yuuki Takamigahara was a former Duelist, now nothing more than a simple shopkeeper. His former master, the one who had called him to this world, was no more.

Albertina was a newly born sixth Shinki of mysterious origin; the reason for her birth was yet shrouded in mystery.

Left with nothing, she'd sold herself to Yuuki, pleading for his help in return.

Yuuki had accepted her offer, and under their agreement, he served as her substitute Duelist.

In order to make full use of his half of the deal, Yuuki had her help around the store. That notwithstanding, the thought constantly ran through his mind that he needed to keep her safe – that he would have to do his utmost to meet her expectations.

She had, after all, foregone the opportunity to summon a Duelist of her own, choosing Yuuki instead.

“...The fulfilling of a contract is a merchant's duty.”

Above all else, that required keeping the secret of her identity under wraps. To that end, he needed to ensure that she learned to live as a normal girl would. Helping out in the store would be the first step in that process.

“Hmm? Something wrong?” the Shinki asked, staring at him oddly.

“It's nothing. There's a reason I want you to come with me.” Catching Tina's gaze which struggled to stray, he continued, “However, our purpose this time is simply the job at hand. I'm not expecting any fights. We'll just wander around the upper floors a bit; nothing's going to happen. You can think of it as exercise, if you want. Do your best to keep up – you don't want to fall behind the kids, right?”

“Right...”

Tina met Yuuki's gaze through tear-filled eyes.

Several days after, Yuuki and Tina made their way to the training school.

There was yet some time before they were to visit the labyrinth, but there was something they needed to see the children about first.

The training schools were operated by the Church of the Five Holies, which was a theocratic organization in charge of both the worship of the Shinki and the management of the city.

Given the circumstances, the job of adventurer – who provided the means whereby the Shinki held their world together – was held in high regard.

Unfortunately, as the only requirement made of adventurers was that they have the necessary skill, and moreover, because in their world, strength directly translated into wealth, there were more than a few thuggish types among their ranks. —All that aside, it is sufficient to say that no cost was too great when it came to raising future adventurers – a flawless system ensured that any who desired to become an adventurer did, in fact, do so.

After graduation, the most common path involved gradually building experience in the labyrinth while attempting to obtain the necessary qualifications to enter one of the organizations which served the Shinki directly – the Oath Legions.

“Thanks for coming by, you two,” a voice called out as they crossed the gates of the school.

The speaker was a tall man in his thirties with a saber at his waist.

He was a freelance adventurer named Alfred. He’d been a frequent customer of “Shope Boris” dating back to when its namesake had still been around. He was also Franka’s mentor.

He continually bore a languid smile and an easy demeanor, but he was an experienced veteran who had formerly served in the Sky’s Oath Legion.

Yuuki and Tina greeted him in unison.

“I have to say, for you to proactively accept a job for adventurers is pretty rare, Yuuki.”

“Yeah, I was pretty worried you wouldn’t accept, to be honest...”

The voice this time came from the person at Alfred's side, Franka. Smiling brilliantly, she continued, "I want to thank you again for taking the job, Yuuki-san. It's a pleasure to be working with you."

"I'm doing this for myself; it's not like circumstances left me with any other choice, really."

Yuuki shrugged. Even if he considered himself a merchant first and foremost, he acknowledged that it was rather hard to do business when one was starving.

"As luck would have it, I also received this request from the school."

After Alfred had parted ways with the Sky's Oath Legion, his primary occupation had been the mentoring of inexperienced adventurers. In addition to the slaying of Void Beasts and the gathering of Reliquia, this activity formed the final pillar of adventurer activities in the labyrinth.

"Now that you've joined, Yuuki, we can finally form a balanced party. This is fantastic," Alfred remarked, with a calm smile.

Adventurers could largely be divided into three categories.

First, those who wielded swords, axes, spears, bows, etc. – physical attackers.

Secondly, those who employed Orisons in battle – clerics.

Finally, those engaged in all non-combat roles such as Reliquia appraisal and the gathering and selling of labyrinth intel – the support specialists.

Each type of adventurer had their own specialties. In this way, they'd be up to the task no matter what was required, whether that be combat or exploration or anything else.

Their party was in charge of supervising three students. Each of the beginning class trainees was around ten years of age, and having frequently served as an assistant instructor, Yuuki knew them all.

“Oh, Yuuki-sensei! How’s it going?”

“Regards.”

The energetic voice belonged to Edgar, while the calm words came from Selim.

“P-Pleased to be in your care...”

The final greeting, only barely louder than a whisper, came from a young girl named Kaya.

Although Kaya ought to be oldest of the three by a year or two, she was a timid girl, eternally lacking in self-confidence. An unremarkable student, really.

Tina watched her curiously before clapping her hands.

“I remember now! I’ve seen you in town before!”

Tina’s tremendous shout left Kaya trembling in shock.

“T-That’s right; I remember you too. The Onee-san from the puppet show...”

“Yeah! Thanks for your help that time. I’ll be in your care this time as well!”

“...Listen, you’re the one who’s supposed to be taking care of others here,” Yuuki whispered.

Generally speaking, the further one descended into the labyrinth, the more vicious the Void Beasts encountered would be.

On the other hand, any Void Beast that could be found in the early levels didn’t really constitute a threat. That said, prevention was the best cure.

Because Kaya and the others were here simply to observe, he wasn’t going to allow them to fight. Even then, however, he wanted to make sure they knew how to keep themselves safe.

The party ran through several drills where they imagined enemies had attacked from the front, the side, and behind.

The first to tire was, as expected, Tina.

“W-What... hellish... training...” Tina gasped out, one painful word at a time, while greedily gulping down oxygen. “It’s... exhausting... being... an... adventurer...”

“Man, you sure are weak, Onee-chan,” Edgar, still full of energy, teased Tina. “You’re just fodder for Void Beasts like this, you know?”

“You’re being rude, Edgar!”

Selim grabbed his companion’s collar in concern. Selim, too, was in much better condition than Tina.

Tina borrowed Franka’s water canteen. After moistening her throat, her breathing and pulse finally returned to normal.

“You need to understand something, kids. Tina’s true faculties don’t lie in raiding.”

“Faculties?”

“It means an ‘ability’ or ‘aptitude,’ Edgar,” Selim explained.

“Then what *are* you good at, Tina-onee-chan?”

“I’m glad you asked.”

Tina stuck her chest out proudly.

“Know this – Tina’s original duty is to watch over and protect this cit——
Ow!”

“...You. Come over here for a moment.”

After thumping her soundly atop the head, Yuuki dragged Tina over to the corner.

“You stupid Shinki! Again! You did it again!”

“B-But... he made me do it!” Tina pouted. “If I just had enough divine energy, then I could show him what I’m really capable of!”

“I will allow no such thing. Are you trying to give away your true identity? —Anyway, is it really appropriate for one of the Shinki to argue with a young child like that?”

“Hmph.”

“...Do you really understand? Our goal here is to teach those kids. If you’re going to lower yourself to their level, just how are you supposed to do that?”

“...”

“You need to be more tolerant; don’t get mad over such petty things. There’s no need to fight back. Listen calmly and gently and *then* they will follow. You’re like a big sister to them, after all.”

“A big sister...” Tina repeated softly. “A big sister, is it...? Hmm, I like the sound of that. —Alright, I’ve got it. It’s a big sister’s job to have a big heart and be forgiving, I guess? Okay.”

In a flash, her mood had improved. Yuuki sighed.

Although Edgar could be a bit careless with his words, he wasn’t a bad kid. He was certain they could get along.

As he was thinking this and pacing back toward the students, he noticed Kaya staring at him.

Their eyes met for just the slightest moment before she quickly turned away.

(...That girl sure seems pretty dispirited today.)

Although it had to be said that even on a normal day, she was quite timid, but today, she was strange even by those standards. She hadn't spoke a word to anyone all day.

"Perhaps something's bothering her?" he thought to himself.

Well, there's no need to make a big deal about it yet. I'll keep an eye on it.

The doors of the adventurer training school were open to all.

Kaya had entered the school under the premise of being an orphan.

Because adventurers were necessary for the city's continued survival, the trainees – future adventurers – were treated well. Room and board were both provided; there wasn't really anything to complain about.

After finishing dinner in the cafeteria, Kaya returned to her room.

Usually, residents were two to a room, but because she'd been unable to find a roommate, she currently lived alone. For this introverted girl, unskilled in human communication, that was a small blessing.

(Today was so tiring...)

Both body and spirit were weary. *I think I'll turn in early.*

Kaya opened the door to her room. To her shock, someone was sitting on her bed.

"You're back."

She yelped in surprise at the voice.

"...There's no need to be so scared, Shinki-sama. I'm positively wounded."

The dark-skinned young man feigned offense as he shrugged.

"J-Jahar... You gave me a heart attack."

Kaya sighed and entered the room, closing the door behind her. Her heart pounded in her ears.

Although she pretended to be nothing more than a simple trainee, her true identity was none other than one of the five Shinki protecting the city, the “Shinki Crowned with the Moon.”

This young man – Jahar – was her Duelist.

“Um, the dorm forbids strangers from entering, you know... How did you get in?”

“Window.”

“This is the third floor...”

“And your point is...?” Jahar responded calmly. “Don’t get caught up in such trivialities. Anyway, why the surprise? I told you before there was something we needed to talk about. Plus, when I’m nearby, you can feel my presence, right?”

A special bond existed between Duelist and Shinki.

If they focused, they could feel the other’s presence. Furthermore, within a certain range, they were capable of telepathic communication as well.

“S-Sorry. I was a bit out of it.”

“If you’re going to be that unmotivated, then this is going to be pretty hard on me. You need to try harder.”

Jahar sighed in disappointment.

“You Shinki are ever in the middle of a battle to the death. If you’re careless for even the slightest moment, someone will seize the opportunity, and that will be the end of you. Since I’ll be dying right alongside you, please try to avoid such a death at all costs, would you?”

“I-I understand.”

“Do you really?”

Jahar crossed his arms, looking askance at her.

“Kaya-chan, you’re simply too timid. You would do well to pick up some of that Tina girl’s fearlessness.”

“S-Sorry.”

Kaya shrank from him as she answered. *I wish I could just disappear.*

When a Shinki initiated the summoning for a Duelist, the Heavenly King would select the person most appropriate to serve them and call them forth from another world – or so it was told.

However, Kaya had always felt that she simply could not get along with Jahar.

Truth be told, she was terrified of his savage and barbarous demeanor. Absolutely terrified. Their personalities could not have been less alike.

She’d come into this world but three years prior; after Tina, she was the youngest of the Shinki.

The moment a Shinki was born, they’d come into being with knowledge on several topics:

The world, slowly approaching death at the hands of The Devourer. The existence of the barriers preventing its advance. The town of Solitus and the labyrinth, Magna PortaGreat Gate. Reliquia and divine energy. And finally, their mission and the nature of their enemies——

Yes, the very moment she’d entered this world, she’d been thrust into the heart of this cruel battle to the death.

The reason Kaya, the “Shinki Crowned with the Moon,” had been born was due to the death of the previous Shinki of that title. In order to avoid the fate of her predecessor, victory was necessary.

That knowledge, however, didn't make things any easier.

Generally speaking, not only did the Shinki have a Duelist at their command, but also a company of elite adventurers known as an Oath Legion, whom were relied upon for their ability to retrieve Reliquia from the labyrinth with great effectiveness. Unfortunately, the previous "Shinki Crowned with the Moon" had, prior to her death, disbanded the Moon's Oath Legion for some unknown reason.

Thus Kaya and Jahar had had to start entirely from scratch.

The first step would be to rebuild the Moon's Oath Legion, but the problem was she had neither divine energy nor money, let alone a network of contacts. For that reason, she'd been forced to hide her identity and live among the people, gathering intel by hand.

When it came to gathering intel firsthand, obviously the nearer she was to the labyrinth itself, the better. However, given her physical age, if she were to move about in the labyrinth, her actions would draw attention. Consequently, she'd enrolled in the training school as a trainee and Jahar had pretended to be an adventurer.

The Shinki did not age, and so if she stayed at the training school for too long, she would eventually arouse suspicion. She'd already been a student here for two years; she didn't have much longer. Just as she was worrying about the impending necessity of producing at least *some* results, she'd heard news of a sixth Shinki – Albertina.

In the month since, her primary duty had been to observe Tina.

Tina's cheerful innocence was radiant like the sun; she was practically the embodiment of Kaya's ideal self. She'd long thought that if she could be like Tina, then all would be well. Kaya mused to herself that if she wasn't continually mindful, then she'd likely find herself growing fond of her fellow Shinki.

Kaya had thus forcefully cut off her feelings and done her utmost to avoid thinking about what relationship they might have in the future.

“So? What’s the situation?”

“Oh, um, as you asked, I registered for the event and have been placed in their party. We met and practiced just earlier.”

“You’ve done well. And the Snow Blade King?”

“Yuuki-sensei? He’ll be coming as well...”

“Of course. Man, how great it would be to fight him... Anyway, for victory’s sake, we’ll need to go after them one at a time.”

Watching him, Kaya had an ominous premonition.

“About that... what do you plan to do exactly?”

“Oh, the Star Shinki’s asked me to end the lives of Tina and Yuuki.”

“Wha——”

Kaya froze.

Kaya and the “Shinki who Scatters the Stars,” Elfriede, were allied. At the very beginning, the other party had come to her with the proposal.

Jahar had noted that Elfriede likely felt there was little value in simply killing Kaya, as a new Shinki would simply be born again some time later. When it came down to it, she’d much rather have another Shinki under her instead.

At the time, Kaya had only just been born, and without even an Oath Legion to serve her, she’d had no room to refuse the offer.

Even now their relationship was anything but equal; if anything, Kaya was now essentially a subordinate of hers.

“You can’t kill anyone, Kaya-chan, so I’ll have to handle this one. When it comes to splitting the two of them up, though, please do your best,” Jahar remarked cheerfully.

The Shinki and their Duelists were protected by an aura of divine energy known as the ScutumHoly Shield, and were impervious to harm under most circumstances. Penetrating this shield was possible only via a very limited number of methods, one of which Jahar possessed – a celestial Dragon Fang weapon.

“K-Kill...?”

“Huh?”

“When you say k-kill, do you mean now? Why?”

Kaya, finally finding her voice, spoke.

“Apparently it’s ‘for the world.’ That vixen wouldn’t explain in any greater detail, though. ———In any event, Shinki-sama, that girl’s another Shinki-like existence – our enemy, in other words. No matter how you look at it, this is good for us.”

“B-But, I can’t do anything like that.”

“No worries; I’m the one doing the killing here, not you.”

“I-I don’t want to help, either...”

Kaya found it hard to speak.

Jahar narrowed his eyes and gave a bitter laugh.

“In other words, Kaya-chan, you’ve given up on victory – on life?”

“U-um...”

“If you refuse to allow me to do this, then all that awaits us is death. Hate conflict if you want, but do you have the resolve to bear the consequences? Are you ready for you and your Duelist to die a dog’s death?”

“...”

Kaya couldn't speak.

"If you understand, then that's great."

Jahar smiled. His previously dangerous expression had disappeared without a trace.

"Our enemies still have no idea who we really are. Moreover, Yuuki 'saw me die' in the incident a month ago, so I should be pretty free to move around. If we were to fight out in the open in the city, then cleaning things up afterward would be a problem, so we'll need to end this in the labyrinth itself. We'll decide which one to kill first as circumstance allows. ——When do you leave?"

"Huh?"

Kaya was lost for a moment before realizing that he was referring to the trainees' trip to the labyrinth.

"Ah, um, the exact time hasn't been decided yet, but I've heard it's going to be four or five days from now."

"Good, that gives us time to plan. We'll continue this conversation later, okay, Kaya-chan?" Jahar said happily.

"Yuuki-kun, what do you think about changing things up a little?" she asked, her hands crossed behind her back.

She appeared slightly displeased, but about what, Yuuki had not the slightest idea.

So he asked.

"What exactly?"

"My name!"

“Your name...?”

“...That’s exactly what I’m talking about.”

She frowned. That was a bad omen.

“A name’s really important, you know? A name means that ‘you’re not just anyone, you’re you.’ It’s a very important sign.”

She was slightly taller than Yuuki, who’d been frozen at his thirteen-year old height, and so when they spoke, she had to stoop slightly to speak to him. He didn’t mind, though.

“I don’t quite understand. Could you explain?”

“——Oh, you!”

She shook her head in surprise.

“This child is just too slow. ——Yuuki-kun, you’re always calling me ‘you.’ You have a name, Yuuki Takamigahara, and your Onee-san does too! I’ve told you before, you know! Simply put, when you don’t use my name, I feel lonely. It makes me sad.”

As she spoke, she held his cheeks in her palms and laughed.

“So, call me by my name, alright?”

“If that’s what you want, then okay.”

“Oh, and it’d be great if you put some feeling into it. Feel free to add ‘beloved’ or ‘beautiful’ before my name too.”

Yuuki sighed. She was always like this, never hearing a word anyone said.

“Or you can add ‘onee-chan’ to the end if you want. Now, why don’t you give it a try?”

“Muriel-onee-chan.”

“...”

Her mouth snapped shut and she blushed to the tips of her ears.

“W-What are you saying all of a sudden?! This kid!”

“You were the one who wanted me to call you that.”

“R-Right. I really shouldn’t be the one saying this, but that sure makes me embarrassed. Much more so than I expected. It’s almost like I’ve done something I shouldn’t have. ———Anyway, from now on, it’s not ‘you,’ it’s Muriel, okay? You don’t need to add anything after that. Okay, give it another try.”

“...Muriel.”

“Again.”

“Muriel.”

“Mm. That feels right. Simplest is best, I guess. Alright, make sure to call me by name from now on, okay?”

Having finished saying what she wanted to say, she laughed aloud.

Yuuki couldn’t tell what the difference was.

But seeing how happy it’d made her, he kept that thought to himself.

The cheerful sound of chopping filled the cramped kitchen.

Yuuki was making a stew with the vegetables Franka had brought a few days prior. If they were careful about using ingredients, they’d be good for a while longer. They’d been lucky.

Yuuki cut the vegetables with a deft, practiced hand—— Suddenly he stopped.

(...That memory again.)

His dream from the night before came to mind once more.

That had been the first time he'd called "her" name – a pure, blissful memory untainted by negativity. Alas, it hadn't been until long after things had concluded that he'd come to that realization.

He exhaled slowly and deeply. He knew what had brought on the memory.

More likely than not, it had been those words he'd shared with Tina – of what it meant to be a "big sister."

As far as he was concerned, there was only one "Onnee-san" – "her." When he'd spoken to Tina, he'd also thrown the inner sanctum of his heart into disarray.

The mere thought of Muriel brought with it a deep pain.

——That notwithstanding, it was no longer of a degree that he could not bear it. On the contrary, some of that pain had now been replaced by a gentle warmth.

Perhaps this was "her" influence.

But was that a happy thing...?

"——Ow!"

Suddenly, a sharp pain ran through his finger.

"Are you alright, Master?"

Tina, who'd gone out back to draw some water from the well, had returned.

"...I cut myself."

"Oh, you weren't paying enough attention, huh? You need to be more careful."

“...That sure is hard to swallow, coming from you. I need to cover it; would you mind grabbing some bandages for me?”

“Mm... Let me take a look first, actually.”

Without waiting for an answer, Tina grabbed his hand and assessed the wound.

——In the blink of an eye, the cut was gone and any blood that had spilled forth had disappeared as well.

“Hmm, not bad if I do say so myself, especially considering I’ve never done this before. ——What’s the matter? Hurry up and praise me, Master!”

Yuuki ignored the indignant Tina, instead continuing to stare at his hand.

“...This wasn’t a healing art. You turned back time, didn’t you?”



Rather than stimulating the body's natural healing processes for recovery, she'd instead restored his finger to the state it'd been in before it'd been cut.

“Oh, you know? Yeah, this way it won't leave a scar. It's completely——
Ow!”

Yuuki had flicked her forehead with his finger.

“W-What do you think you're doing?!” Tina asked with tear-filled eyes, rubbing her head.

“Didn't I tell you before not to use your powers without permission?” he replied.

The miracles of the Shinki – effects far beyond the ability of humans to replicate.

Divine energy, the fuel which powered such miracles, had to be slowly accumulated through the collection of Reliquia found in the labyrinth.

When Yuuki had first found her, she'd pretty much exhausted her internal supply. In the time since, however, he'd provided her with Reliquia to partially replenish that reservoir. She'd just wasted some of that store.

“It's fine. There's no one else here besides you and I, Master,” Tina retorted.

“It's a waste of divine energy either way. You scamp – you're the kind who spends all their allowance the second they get it, aren't you?”

“I've never had any allowance, so I can't tell you. ——Oh! How would you like to give me some, though?”

“I refuse. I don't have that kind of money.”

“Hmph. Master's such a scrooge.”

Tina sighed.

“——But what did you expect? Helping people with the power of miracles is the responsibility and privilege of the Shinki. If someone needs help, then Tina will help them. If someone gets hurt, then Tina will heal them. Even if that person is stingy Master!”

“That last sentence was unnecessary. ——I get what you mean. But more seriously, setting the matter of divine energy aside entirely, I don’t want you doing anything too flashy when we don’t know who may be watching. I’m very grateful that you’ve healed my wound. Thank you.”

Yuuki stooped over and patted her on the head.

“Ah...”

Tina reddened. Trying to hide her embarrassment, she proudly stuck her chest out and spoke.

“I-If you understand, then that’s good. I give you my permission to express your gratitude.”

Yuuki mused to himself that her personality was straightforward indeed. In any event, he hadn’t been lying when he’d said he was grateful for her help. Her reaction had been pretty adorable, too – like a small puppy.

“What’re you so distracted by, Master?”

“...Distracted?”

“Yeah. No matter how I look at it, I can only conclude that your mind is somewhere else. If that wasn’t the case, you’d never have done something so silly as cutting your finger like that. What’s wrong? Something bothering you? Are you worried about something? Come, share with Albertina.”

“No, it’s nothing like that.”

He poured water into the stew pot and then adjusted the stove as he spoke.

“I was just reminded of some things from long ago.”

“Long ago?”

“I was remembering the Shinki whom I served as a Duelist.”

“Oh...”

“What’s wrong?” Yuuki asked, noticing that her expression had suddenly changed.

It was almost like she was upset... or hurt.

“I-It’s nothing; never mind. —It was definitely a good memory, right?”

Tina’s words came in a flurry, and she continued.

“So, um... how was it?”

“How was what?”

“Your Shinki. What kind of person was she?”

“Oh. Very different from you. She was tall, with a very mature feel about her.”

Not that a Shinki’s age meant anything.

“She loved to laugh... In that respect, the two of you are quite similar, actually.”

“Similar... A-And in other areas?”

“Hmm? You seem pretty concerned about all this. —Oh, the fire’s too weak. Why don’t you go clean the store and I’ll call you when I’m done cooking.”

As he finished speaking, Yuuki left to gather firewood.

(...I was able to talk about it calmly.)

That he'd been able to keep his calm as he spoke about "her" was a surprise to him.

Last night's dream had been the same. As he thought of the past, he found that the feelings his memories stirred were no longer solely those of pain. He, too, was slowly changing.

"——Memories had best stay as just memories."

Yuuki intentionally spoke aloud to disrupt that chain of thought. The gloomy feelings dissipated a bit.

What he needed to focus on now was how best to help Tina.

Yuuki walked up to the pile of firewood stacked up behind the store.

Double-checking to make sure no one was around, he kicked a log high into the air.

"Yah!"

With a shout, the log split into ten pieces which fell to the ground.

At some point in that brief instant, he'd drawn his weapon.

A Reliquia of the highest order, a celestial Dragon Fang weapon which could slay even the gods – the NixSnow Blade.

A normal person would not only have been unable to trace its arc through the air just now, but would not have even noticed he'd moved.

"...I've gotten slow," Yuuki muttered, taking the firewood into his arms. His sword had vanished as suddenly as it had come.

——Yuuki was a former Duelist once known as the Snow Blade King.

The Duelists were frighteningly powerful bodyguards to the Shinki. They were untouched by the hands of time and could not be wounded by most weapons; in this respect, they were like their masters.

However, Yuuki's master had since passed on, and he'd lost the special traits of a Duelist.

He was now as susceptible to time and harm as any other.

All the experience and skills he had accumulated during his time as a Duelist, however, were yet his. He was definitely at a disadvantage, but he felt confident that should he regain his previous condition, he would be a match for other Duelists.

With that said, did he have it in him to keep Tina safe?

She was the sixth Shinki, an unnatural existence.

Even if her foolish actions were decidedly out of the ordinary, her true nature yet remained a secret. As the other Shinki were unaware of her, they did not need to fear an ambush.

——Or so he desperately hoped, recognizing that such a thought was nothing more than a vain wish, subject to his personal desires.

If knowledge of Tina's existence had already spread to the other Shinki, and they were even now under watch, what should he do?

The matter bore consideration.

“In the end, whether they be friend or foe, contact with the other Shinki is inevitable...”

Yuuki thought back to his time as a Duelist.

When it came to battles between the Shinki and, by extension, their Duelists, a straightforward battle was far from the only strategy.

If one blindly charged into battle, it was possible that even non-hostile factions would consider one too much of a threat to be left alone. In such an event, even if you triumphed over the opponent before you, that was hardly the end of your troubles.

It went without saying, of course, that the other Shinki were in the same position.

For that reason, it was very common for Shinki to join hands – to form an alliance, in other words.

If Tina were able to form an alliance with another Shinki, then at the very least, it'd be less one opponent they had to face.

“The problem is, we have nothing to offer.”

Yuuki returned to the kitchen.

Tina was gone. She had gone to clean the store, as Yuuki had directed.

To even hold a conversation with another Shinki, let alone form an alliance, first required grounds for meeting. That, of course, was true for both parties. If only one party had anything to offer, then such a thing would never happen; in this respect, it was exactly the same as doing business.

If they and another faction were to join hands, it'd do much for him and Tina, but what would the other side receive?

The gifting of Reliquia was generally enough to open a dialogue, but he had none to offer. His celestial Dragon Fang weapon was, of course, out of the question.

“That being the case, then all I have to offer is intel. —Right now, the only one who knows the meaning behind the ‘Sixth’ is me,” he mused.

That there were five Shinki was a fundamental aspect of the system, and yet a sixth had now appeared.

Once others knew what he knew, others would understand the need for an alliance. The problem was, he didn't know how to initiate contact with the other Shinki. Moreover, the others had no way to externally verify what he knew to be true.

——Whatever the case might be, he had no desire to simply complain or play the role of a passive spectator.

He would not lose another Shinki. No matter what it took.

“Good morning. ——Ooh, something smells good.”

Franka smiled as she stepped into the store.

“Breakfast, is it, Tina-chan? ...Er, Tina-chan?”

The girl in question was holding onto a rag while completely spaced out in the middle of the store.

“Oh, Franka.”

Tina blinked, having only just noticed Franka’s presence.

“How long have you been here? Oh, right! Welcome! Welcome.”

“Um, I’d already greeted you. ——Is something wrong? You were quite out of it.”

“N-Nothing. It’s nothing.”

“You sure don’t look like it’s nothing.”

Tina was normally full of energy, to the point that she basically couldn’t stay still. For her to be like this was rare indeed.

However, if the person herself said she was fine, Franka wasn’t going to push the matter.

“Is Yuuki not here today?”

“He’s here; he’s in the kitchen, working on a stew. There was only a handful of meat left, though; if it weren’t for the vegetables you brought Franka, we’d have starved.”

“I-Is that so? I’m glad I was able to help.”

She’d had a sense that they were in pretty dire circumstances; that had been the reason she’d sent over the vegetables in the first place. With that said, things were apparently worse even than she’d feared.

“So, what brings you here today, Franka? Is there something you need?”

“Oh, I’m not here to buy anything. I was looking for Yuuki, actually...”

“If that’s the case, why not eat with us? The food ought to be just about ready.”

“Is that alright?”

“It was your food to begin with. There’s no need to be polite; Master will be happy as well. He worked on it to the point that he cut himself, after all
_____”

Tina suddenly stopped, and her beautiful eyebrows narrowed.

She seemed displeased almost... or perhaps confused.

“...Did the two of you have a fight?”

“N-No. We’re fine... Or at least, we should be...”

“In that case, what did Yuuki-san say?”

“No, it’s nothing he said——”

Her words were a bit vague. Tina sighed and continued.

“There’s no point in lying to myself. It’s true that it’s because of something Master said, but the fault is my own... or so I think. Lately, when I’ve talked with Master, something’s felt off. Actually, perhaps ‘off’ isn’t the right word either – annoying, maybe.”

“And why is that?” Franka asked, frowning.

As far as she could tell, the trust between Tina and Yuuki ran deep. Deep enough that it made her envious even.

What could possibly have happened?

“The second the conversation turns to a certain topic – or it’s even brought up, really – I start to feel really lost and confused. More specifically——”

Her next words were carefully chosen.

“Master, before... there was someone he was extremely close to – a woman.”

“...”

“Recently, she’s all he—— Franka?”

This time Tina was the one worried.

“You’re so pale... what’s wrong?”

“N-Nothing! Y-Y-Yeah. Yuuki-san’s so gentle, so of course there had to be one or two people like that.”

This isn’t anything that major. It’s just that kind of thing, you know. It’s definitely not the kind of thing that’d leave you feeling so shocked your knees’d buckle or so disappointed that you wanted to vanish. It’s nothing! I... am... fine.

——Tina’s worried gaze never left Franka, though.

“Um... does that mean that you find it strange too, Franka?”

“Uh, yeah. You could say that. At the very least, I think I understand how you feel, Tina-chan...”

Yes, she really, *really* understood.

“A-And? That woman – where is she now?”

“It seems she passed away some time ago.”

“Is that so...”

She felt herself calm down slightly.

She knew that this wasn't something she could step into lightly. Feelings of curiosity or even sympathy weren't enough. Especially since this was Yuuki they were talking about.

Who had she been? How had they spent their days together? Franka wondered, enduring the pain wracking her heart. She was undoubtedly someone who had greatly influenced Yuuki's personality and perspective on life.

“This... gloom that feels like it's suffocating my heart... what is it?”

Tina sighed.

“If I had to say, it feels like a mix of sadness and anger. But if I think about it, Master hasn't done anything to warrant either of those feelings, you know? Maybe... I'm sick?”

“Yep, you could definitely say that.”

“Oh no?!”

“Moreover, this illness isn't one that has a cure.”

“How can that be?! W-What should I do?!”

Unable to hold back her laughter, Franka giggled.

Tina, on the verge of bursting into tears, blinked in surprise.

“...Wait – were you tricking me?” Tina pouted. “That's going too far! I'm being serious here.”

“I'm sorry. I couldn't help it – you were just too cute.”

Franka stowed the smile and apologized.

“——But I have to say, I wasn’t fooling you; what I said was all true. What you’re afflicted with is very well-known, and I must confess I don’t know the cure either. You’ll just have to accept it. ——Oh, I should add, though, that it’s nothing that needs to be cured. There’s no need to worry.”

It seemed Tina had been infected by that affliction both joyous and painful.

“Oh... So there’s nothing I can do?”

“Right.”

“Oh...”

Tina looked utterly bewildered.

She really was too cute, Franka thought to herself. Her only sibling was her half-brother through her mother’s side. Having no sisters, she mused that this must be what it felt like to have a little sister.

“Hey, Tina. Food’s ready——” Yuuki called, sticking his head out of the kitchen. “Eh? Oh, Franka.”

“Pardon the intrusion.”

“Not at all. Have you eaten? I’ve made a stew with the ingredients you brought. If you don’t mind, why not join us? I’m eager to hear the opinion of a true chef.”

“You’re exaggerating, but I would be more than happy to eat with you guys,” Franka said with a laugh. “Oh, by the way – the school’s made contact. The date for the trip’s been decided.”

“We have three adventurers, and four with temporary permits. Please take a look.”

Yuuki handed the requisite paperwork to the Church knight posted at the gate.

Several of the labyrinth's entrances were under the direct supervision of the Church. These entrances were enclosed on all sides by walls and sealed off with enormous iron gates; only authorized personnel were granted entry.

Yuuki, Franka, and Alfred held the necessary qualifications. The students – Kaya, Edgar, and Selim – held temporary permits allowing them to enter the labyrinth if escorted by a qualified adventurer. Tina, who was responsible for leading their group despite not being a certified adventurer, had similarly been granted a temporary permit.

The enclosure sealed off by the metal gates was a small plaza surrounded by a stone wall some tens of meters long. In the center of this plaza lay a stairwell descending into the subterranean depths below.

“Okay everyone, form up.”

Yuuki clapped his hands, signaling the children to take up their positions.

“Before we head in, there's something you need to hear: the labyrinth is a dangerous place where your life is at risk; never forget that. Furthermore, the danger isn't just to you, but to your party as a whole. In short, carelessness endangers not just yourself, but everyone around you.”

Sooner or later, there could come a time when they would experience this truth firsthand. By then, it would be too late to do them any good. Even if they felt it a hassle now, it was something that needed to be said.

“Although right now you are wards being escorted, make sure that you follow what we practiced the other day. If anyone acts up, discipline will be harsh.”

Simply because previous excursions had been safe did not guarantee the current trip would be as well.

Accidents could happen even in the upper levels of the labyrinth. When it came to the labyrinth, Magna PortaGreat Gate, *no* eventuality could be

counted out.

All three students wore meek expressions.

“One other thing. I think you guys are already aware, but there are three types of adventurers. The warriors who face Void Beasts head-on, the clerics who employ their Orisons from the back, and the support specialists whose job is to keep their cool and provide situational analysis and intel. At the moment, you three do not fall into any of the above – you’re simply here to observe. Your training won’t split up by category for some time yet. That said, it’s not a bad time to decide what you’d like to be. Although you’re here today as guests, I want you to do your best to watch us and imagine what you would do were you in our position. ——Okay, let’s go.”

As prompted, they entered as one.

“For someone who hates the labyrinth as much as you, you sure are good at this kind of thing,” Alfred commented easily.

Because Yuuki was closest to the children, he’d been put in charge of issuing directions. Although he’d protested that he wasn’t qualified to do so, because he hadn’t been able to completely refute their reasoning, things had turned out in this manner.

“My way of living requires that I put forth effort commensurate with the reward, and the training school is compensating us most generously. That said, allow me to remind you once more, I’m a merchant. Neither working as an adventurer nor mentoring these children is my true calling.”

“Yep, yep. I understand.”

“Why do I doubt that...?”

Alfred seemed to find something extremely satisfying as he watched Yuuki, whom was filled with a deep antipathy at the sight.

“I’m sorry... I shouldn’t have suggested this job after all, I guess?” Franka asked.

Her apologetic look left Yuuki in a fluster.

“N-No, please don’t apologize. I’m very thankful to you, really. I definitely needed the money.”

“Yeah, it was really a big help. ——Putting that aside for the moment, when I see Master watching over the children, I get the feeling that he’s actually quite happy.”

“I think so too,” Franka agreed.

“Really?”

“It’s one of the things I really l-l-like about you.”

“Thanks. I have to admit, I rather enjoy it. That notwithstanding, I’m still primarily a merchant – not an adventurer.”

“Merchant...”

“Something wrong?”

“N-Not at all!” Franka denied frantically. “If you remember, Yuuki-san, it was your business sense that saved me.”

Franka had at one point been deceived by a loan shark, and on the verge of being sold into prostitution. Yuuki had saved her.

“It’s just that...”

“Yes?”

“The reason you distance yourself from adventuring work, and the reason you insist on being a merchant... Is it because of——”

Franka was unable to finish.

“Because of?”

“N-Never mind. I’m going to go to see how the kids are doing!”

She ran off.

She can be so strange at times, Yuuki thought to himself.

Divine energy powered light fixtures ran along the walls. The road was paved stone.

Maps were cheap and Church knights were on patrol.

The labyrinth had been tamed up to the third floor, making the journey an easy one for adventurers. The three trainees had also been here before as part of their training.

—However, the female member of the three looked anything but at ease.

“I need to focus, I need to remember...” she reminded herself.

Because the members of the party knew Jahar, if he were seen, it’d arouse suspicion. Consequently, this task had been left in Kaya’s hands. She, of course, needed to be careful not to let on that she was actually the “Shinki Crowned with the Moon.”

Accordingly, there were several things she needed to take note of.

First, she could not allow anyone to notice that she could not be harmed.

If she emerged completely unscathed from an instance where she should have been wounded, the anomaly would arouse anyone’s suspicion. Furthermore, Yuuki and Tina would immediately understand the implications of such an occurrence – the ScutumHoly Shield which belonged only to the Shinki and their Duelists. Although they weren’t supposed to fight today anyway, it was still best to avoid any dangerous circumstances.

Second, she could not exercise the power of miracles.

The Orisons of human clerics and the power of miracles held by the Shinki were similar in nature, but vastly different in scope. Although she was

nowhere near the level of the other Shinki, she had managed to accumulate a certain degree of divine energy, with which she could exercise this power. However, were she to do so, Tina would likely notice. The Shinki were capable of detecting when another was working a miracle, after all.

If her true identity was somehow leaked, she could still escape via teleportation. Unfortunately, that would be tantamount to accepting defeat. Neither Jahar nor the “Shinki who Scatters the Stars” would look lightly upon such an action.

“——I-I can’t help it.”

Selim’s voice sounded from behind her.

“Are you scared?” Edgar had teased, prompting the response.

“W-Well, didn’t something terrible happen here just a little while ago? What if something like that happens again?”

Just as Selim had said, a large incident had indeed taken place here on the third floor not long ago. Countless Void Beasts, normally found only in the lower depths of the labyrinth, had suddenly appeared and attacked, producing numerous victims. Although the threat had been dealt with, restoration was still underway, and traces of the battle still scarred the walls.

Edgar, too, was a bit frightened, but he put on a brave face and bragged, “Hmph. I-I saw a huge one with my own eyes, you know? But I came out completely unharmed, so I’m not worried!”

Kaya and the other trainees weren’t entirely clear on the particulars of the incident; the most rational explanation they’d heard involved a misfiring of a teleportation device.

Although, truth be told, Kaya knew that the tragedy had been man-made.

The instigator had been her aide, the swordsman Jahar. His goal had been to reduce the power of an opposing faction.

Even though he'd taken unilateral action in the matter, Kaya couldn't say she was blameless. Each time she thought of the victims of the tragedy she was filled with deep remorse and sorrow.

"Hmm? Kaya, you're shaking. Are you scared too?"

"...Mm, yes. I'm frightened."

She answered honestly.

Frightened of what had happened before. Frightened of what would happen today.

Because of her, people had been hurt. Because of her, people had been killed.

And most of all, frightened of her destiny.

All of these things terrified her, to the point that she didn't know what to do.

"Oh come on. You're just being unsightly now."

"If you're too careless, then you'll be the one regretting it," Selim reminded.

Edgar snorted.

"Idiot. Like I'd do anything that stupid. You guys are just too cowardly for your own good."

Selim sighed, giving up on trying to convince Edgar.

"..."

Kaya watched the two in silence.

From the bottom of her heart, she did not want to see them harmed. If she had any choice in the matter, she hoped they would not get caught up in what was about to happen.

However, the second she had been assigned to the same party as Tina and Yuuki, the scales of fate had dipped into the realm of inevitability.

(Ahh...)

Kaya sighed inwardly.

If only I weren't the "Shinki Crowned with the Moon..." If I were just a normal person, just another adventurer-to-be, life would be so much easier...

Though fearing the labyrinth and the monsters within, she'd nevertheless press forward, exploring the unknown with a childlike innocence, walking the anxious path of an adventurer. That, perhaps, would have been her life.

Alas, the nature of things was such that reality paid her wishes no heed.

This time, she turned to look at Tina, walking up front.

Judging by her appearance, she looked only slightly older than Kaya herself, but she was, in truth, the cheerful "sixth Shinki."

I wonder what she thinks of her position? Of what her existence means?

Is she worried by the fact that she shouldn't exist?

Is she like me, struggling under the weight of crushing pressure? Does she seek escape?

—How she wished she could ask. How she wished they could talk.

Unfortunately, it was nothing more than an idle wish; she could not act.

Once this battle was over, either Tina or herself – perhaps both – would vanish from this world. To reveal herself was tantamount to death.

Tina was an enemy she had to defeat, and not a companion with whom to share her troubles. Definitely not.

“...Everything alright, Kaya?”

Perhaps Tina had felt Kaya’s gaze on her, because she turned and walked over.

“You look pretty pale. Are you tired?”

“I-I’m fine. I’m sorry for worrying you.”

“If you feel tired, don’t hesitate to tell us. I’ll let Master know, and we’ll let you rest. There’s still a long way to go. This is the worst.”

“R-Right. I understand,” Kaya replied. Without realizing that she was still speaking, she continued, “Even though you say ‘this is the worst,’ you look quite happy to me?”

“Oh?”

Tina stared.

“I look happy?”

“Yes. Even though I can tell you’re not familiar with the road, but as you walk, there’s such a bright expression on your face... Onee-san, you’re not a normal adventurer, are you?”

“Mm. Tina’s a store clerk.”

Tina nodded strongly, and then continued.

“But yes, when everyone’s together like this, it makes me happy. Even if we happen to be in the labyrinth. Tina loves to be with other people. To be honest, from the very moment I was born, watching over the city and its people has been my—— Oh, wait. Master said I shouldn’t say this part.”

Tina flashed a quick glance in Yuuki’s direction to reassure herself that he hadn’t overheard.

The second Kaya heard Tina mention her responsibilities as a Shinki, she thought Tina was greeting her as a fellow Shinki. She raised her guard. Seeing Tina's innocent expression, however, she realized there'd been no ulterior motive behind the statement.

(Still... "Master," is it?)

How strange.

From what Jahar had told her, Yuuki was no longer an active Duelist, though from the looks of things, he was more or less just that. What stood out to her, though, was how Tina referred to him as "Master." Just what on earth was their relationship?

Well, no matter what their relationship might have been, one thing was for certain – it couldn't have been more unlike her relationship with Jahar. After all, every time Tina either mentioned Yuuki or spoke with him, her happiness was plain to see.

"Am I, perhaps, jealous of her?" Kaya wondered.

"——Alright, hold up for a sec."

As Yuuki had directed, the party came to a halt.

Before them lay the stairs leading down to the fourth floor.

"It's been a pretty casual trip so far, however——"

"It's going to get dangerous, right?"

"Exactly, Edgar."

Edgar smiled proudly at the praise.

The fourth floor of the Magna PortaGreat Gate was something of a boundary line. From this floor on, the labyrinth would reveal its true face. This was something that had been hammered into all students of the training school from very early on.

From here on out, the labyrinth would become a twisting, winding maze – a world of darkness and terror.

Void Beasts beyond this point were both larger in size and more ferocious, always awaiting the opportunity to catch humans unaware and devour their prey. “Flight” was no longer a word that existed in the vocabulary of the Void Beasts at these levels.

“You are going to have to be extremely vigilant. Our goal is the sixth through eighth floors. Anyone who fails to keep a weapon at the ready from here on out risks their lives.”



Edgar and Selim swallowed loudly.

“If anyone is injured, or I decide we’re unfit to continue, we will promptly return. If you notice anything at all, let me know. ———Alright, it’s your turn now, Uncle.”

“Right. Form up. Just as we cautioned when we ran drills before, do not break formation and pay constant attention to your surroundings. This, you *must* remember.”

Finishing his words, Alfred led the way down the stairs.

“...Wuu, it’s so dark,” Selim cried out in panic.

From the fourth floor and beyond, the light fixtures attached to walls on previous floors ceased to be present. The only sources of light to be found were the light stones one carried as well as the soft illumination of bioluminescent moss lining the walls.

“Please take these. Don’t lose them.”

Kaya received a small hand-lantern with a light stone contained within.

“The three of you will have to share one. Take turns holding it, alright?”

Edgar shouted that he wanted to carry it first, so Kaya handed it to him. To be honest, she hadn’t particularly wanted to hold it anyway, although as she watched him excitedly turn the lantern this way and that, she was rather envious.

The party continued slowly forward.

They were arranged in the formation they’d drilled in back at the training school.

Alfred held his sword at the ready, the vanguard of the party. Yuuki took up the rear, keeping an eye on everyone. Tina and Franka kept watch over their guests while directing the beams from their lanterns forward, lighting the way ahead. This was a fairly basic party arrangement.

“Even if it’s just the teensiest, tiniest bit dark, there’s nothing there,” Edgar declared loudly, as if to convince himself.

“That’s because we’ve only gone a few steps,” Selim retorted.

“Please, this isn’t any different from what we were doing moments ago on the floors above. All we’re doing is following the road until we reach the stairs and then descending once more. Even I can——”

“Hold it!” a voice called out from the front.

Just then, they heard a slight rustling as something fifteen meters in front of Edgar suddenly charged at him. Alfred’s sword flashed and, with a spray of blood, it was flung in another direction.

“——Edgar, did you not see that just now?” Yuuki asked at last. “There are two dangers to casually chatting in these levels. The first is that you distract yourself, you lose focus. The second is that you are unable to hear what goes on around you over the sound of your voice. For this reason, any and all conversation within the labyrinth should be soft and to the point. Remember that.”

Franka gave a wry smile, and explained further.

“The Void Beasts around here are still pretty small, so they’re not really that dangerous. Take that carnivorous rat from just now, for example. Even if you were to be bitten, you wouldn’t suffer any grievous harm, although you might lose a finger or two.”

“L-Lose...”

Edgar was too frightened to finish.

“Oh, if it’s rats, then our house has them too. Master’s too careless with the cleaning. You’re so strict with other people, but so negligent yourself.”

“I definitely get that impression too.”

Alfred expressed his agreement.

“I-Is that so, Yuuki-san?” Franka asked.

“...Could you guys try not to destroy my serious image over here? This is one of those rare occasions where I’m even teaching seriously and everything.”

Yuuki sighed. Watching him, Kaya couldn’t help but smile.

A serious image – at least the kind that the instructors from the Church of the Five Holies exhibited – wasn’t something that Yuuki had. On the contrary, his familiar manner made him popular among the children.

Even though his expression made it seem as though he hated to be bothered, the fact was that he was always very warm to the students. He was a fantastic teacher.

Kaya’s smile faded.

This happy atmosphere wouldn’t last. She could not allow herself to forget why she’d come.

Indeed, the children who admired Yuuki were many in number. However, if their plan succeeded today, then he would no longer be around to teach those children.

(...I don’t want to do this. Please.)

She couldn’t count the number of times she’d had this thought today alone.

When it came to Tina, there wasn’t much she could do. Although she wasn’t at all eager to see it happen, she could at least understand the necessity of it. She was resolved.

If Tina continued to live, it would be at her own expense. No matter how good their relationship, no matter how deep the feelings ran between them, this fact would not change.

Kaya did not want to die. No matter how much it’d cause her to hate herself, she was going to defeat her “enemies” and live on.

But Edgar, Selim, Alfred, and Franka – Kaya had no desire to see them harmed.

Even if the other party had requested Yuuki's death, he wasn't a true Duelist. Even if he'd been one in the past, he was now nothing more than a human playing guard to a Shinki out of happenstance. There was no need to deal with him in the same manner as Tina.

Unfortunately, Kaya was sure Jahar did not see things that way.

His personality was such that he felt the ends justified the means. If the death of his target required the sacrifice of hundreds of unrelated victims, he would not hesitate to do so.

(Still... I have to wonder what it is that Jahar plans to do?)

Kaya was responsible for keeping an eye on Tina and the others. When the appropriate opportunity appeared, she was to teleport Jahar over, whereupon he'd dispatch both Tina and Yuuki.

——This was what they had decided upon before setting out.

Their plans, however, had been extremely vague. She worried that Jahar had already decided upon all the particulars. If he had, though, he'd intentionally left her in the dark, saying only that they'd speak again later.

If a Shinki and their Duelist were to both open up a "circuit," they'd be able to communicate telepathically regardless of distance. Kaya's only experience with this ability until now had been to report on intel Jahar had demanded of her.

Jahar had not the least degree of respect for her, whether it be about her abilities, her conviction, or anything else.

"A Shinki who isn't trusted by her own Duelist, huh?" Kaya thought to herself. She wanted to cry.

No matter how she looked at it, she was sure that Jahar did not intend an honorable, direct challenge. No, he'd create some kind of disturbance, and

then seize the moment when opportunity arrived. This much Kaya was able to predict, although that was the extent of what she'd been able to determine.

At the very least, she hoped to avoid drawing in any neighboring adventurers.

Jahar had yet to contact her since they'd entered the labyrinth. Although it wasn't like she'd been eagerly anticipating hearing from him, his continued silence nevertheless left her increasingly uneasy.

"Should I try and reach out to him?" she wondered before quickly cutting off that train of thought.

She was not only frightened that he'd scold her for acting on her own, but worse, that he might announce that preparations were ready, and their battle imminent.

Perhaps if she avoided provoking him unnecessarily, there might yet be a way to avoid the upcoming battle...

Suddenly——

「Yo, Kaya-chan. How're things on your end?」

“——!”

Startled by the voice which she heard with her mind, not her ears, she forgot to walk.

Edgar, walking behind her, crashed into her back. Disgruntled, he complained.

“I-I'm so sorry!” Kaya apologized.

Shifting her focus, she continued, 「J-Jahar-san? Don't just call out to me so suddenly.」

「This is the only way for us to speak. How exactly do you expect me to warn you before I'm about to communicate? ——Actually, forget about that

for now; where are you? The fourth floor?」

「Yes. We're roughly around the center of the floor, I believe.」

As she spoke, she did her utmost to ensure that neither did her gaze wander nor did her expression change.

The telepathic communications between a Shinki and her Duelist could not be sensed by other Shinki. That notwithstanding, were she to act strangely, she could draw unwanted attention.

「Got it. Okay then, we're starting now.」

With a light tone, Jahar indicated that their murderous plan was now underway.

「Um, Jahar-san——」

Kaya rushed to speak, although she wasn't quite sure herself what she was planning on saying.

Is it because I've been wavering this whole time that I accidentally blurted something out... or do I really want to call an end to this?

「Let me explain something real quick. I'm about to split the labyrinth up into different sections. Make sure not to leave Tina-chan's side, Kaya-chan. That'll be all.」

Without paying the least bit of respect due his Shinki, Jahar one-sidedly ended the conversation.

(S-Split...?)

What on earth does he mean by that...?

Suddenly, she felt goosebumps all over.

Accompanying the strange feeling was a terrible screech.

“Master! S-Something’s happening!”

“...Can you be a bit clearer, Tina?”

Although his tone indicated surprise, Yuuki’s expression was serious. It seemed he quite trusted Tina.

“I don’t know the specifics, but there’s a tremendous flow of energy——”

Before Tina could finish her sentence, their surroundings twisted.

The world around them spun, as if their sense of equilibrium had been thrown terribly awry. A fierce pain rocked her head, as if she’d been struck.

Kaya screamed and fell to the floor.

“——Is everyone alright?” Yuuki raised his lantern and asked, the phenomenon having drawn to an end.

The shaking; no, perhaps it was more accurate to say the vibrations rocking the entire labyrinth, left them uneasy. Although whatever it was had come and gone in mere instants, it was nevertheless apparent that something major had happened.

The three children didn’t appear to have been hurt. The two boys were confused, but better off than Kaya whom was kneeling on the ground, her hands pressed against the floor for support.

“U-Um, Kaya——” Edgar called out uncertainly.

“I’m fine,” she responded. “I just felt a bit dizzy, but I’m okay...”

“Kaya, come over here by the wall and rest for a bit, okay? Edgar and Selim, could you two give her a hand?”

After issuing directions to the children, Yuuki turned to face forward.

“Uwaaa... T-That was really bad...” Tina murmured, collapsed on the floor.

Alfred and Franka were watching their surroundings guardedly. Franka frowned.

“Franka...”

“I’m fine,” she answered, with an obviously forced smile. “About just now, I think something caused an immense fluctuation of divine energy. My head hurts and my ears are ringing.”

“...It looks like the effects vary depending on one’s sensitivity to divine energy.”

Alfred was completely fine.

Both he and Alfred, as well as Edgar and Selim, were completely unaffected. This appeared to be the reason.

Yuuki gave the three others a chance to rest and went off to scout out the situation.

Perhaps the entire party had just been warped to a different floor... Or not.

The road before them, the stone floor beneath them, the flora around them – everything belonged to the fourth floor.

That notwithstanding, the situation was definitely abnormal.

Without having to think, Yuuki realized what the oddity was. Just as the realization struck him, Alfred whispered.

“...Our surroundings have changed.”

“Yeah.”

This was undoubtedly the fourth floor. ———For about five more meters, anyway.

Looking farther down, he could see stone walls of a different type as well as other types of plants.

Yuuki walked forward to inspect the situation, looking for a boundary line.

The changes were seamless. The walls and floor were seamlessly connected, although the type of stone changed partway through. Walking forward another five meters, he found the anomaly repeated.

Furthermore, ahead of him lay a corner bend that had most certainly not existed there before.

“The way things look, it’s almost like someone broke the labyrinth up into pieces and then assembled them back in a different order. ——Have you guys ever seen anything like this before?”

Alfred and Franka shook their heads.

If they simply stayed here, confused, nothing would change. They needed to confirm the situation before thinking things through.

Just what on earth happened...?

“Franka, is it possible that this is all an illusion brought on by an Orison?”

“I can’t say for sure. There are definitely elements to this that suggest an illusionary Orison, but...”

Her headache having seemingly subsided, she slowly rose.

She reached out and grasped the vegetation on the walls. Yuuki heard the rustling of leaves as she made her inspection.

“Hmm, when you touch them, they certainly feel real enough. Even though our eyes could definitely be fooled in the way you describe, but to create an illusion of this scope – especially one which could fool all five senses – is simply impossible.”

“As I thought. This wasn’t the work of any human.”

That being the case, what other possibility remains——?

“S-Sensei, are we going to be okay?”

“W-We’re not lost, are we?”

Selim and Edgar raised their heads worriedly, and turned to Yuuki.

“This is something you’ve all learned in the training school before. ‘Anything can happen in the labyrinth.’ Well, even if I say that, this isn’t exactly normal even by those standards. As far as you kids are concerned, this is a valuable learning opportunity.”

Yuuki gave a loud, rude laugh. Intentionally.

It was of the utmost importance that they confirm the particulars of their situation and assessed the level of danger they faced. That would only further increase his wards’ unease, however. He had, above all else, been hired to keep them safe.

The silver lining in all of this was that the kids didn’t seem to have been too frightened by the event. As far as they were concerned, confusion was the dominant feeling. Things looked alright for the moment.

Yuuki pulled Tina over to a corner, and spoke to her in whispers.

“...So what’s your guess? What do you think happened?”

“The labyrinth’s gotten all messed up. It feels really strange.”

Tina’s face was stiff. She didn’t seem to have entirely recovered yet.

“I can tell that much with a single glance. I was wondering if you knew what the cause was.”

“Oh...”

Tina frowned, silent.

“Well, I can definitely sense divine energy at work here... but it’s not a miracle created by a Shinki.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Something like this would consume a terrific amount of energy. You’d have to exert your will over the entire labyrinth, divide it into sections, rearrange them, and then seal them in place. The amount of energy that’d take is simply incomparable to say, teleportation. If I had to describe it in a way you could understand, let’s see... If you were to work yourself to death for a hundred lifetimes, it still wouldn’t be enough.”

“...Such a clear method of explanation. Thank you so very much.”

Her manner of speaking aside, her explanation definitely made sense.

However, if this was neither the work of a human nor a Shinki... what other possibility was there?

Some mechanism of the labyrinth?

Or perhaps it was the work of a Reliquia? As he considered the possibility, he realized that he’d definitely heard of a handful of exceedingly rare Reliquia that possessed the ability to distort space itself. Of their current whereabouts, however, he had not the slightest clue.

The possibility that this had been someone’s handiwork, and intentionally done at that, could not be ignored. Unfortunately...

(I can’t determine the cause without more information.)

Yuuki sighed.

“Well, let’s leave further discussion on that topic for later. What’s important now is, can you fix it?”

The tiny Shinki pouted irritably.

“Tina cannot. Or rather, there’s no way she could!”

“...Yeah, I guess so. Sorry for asking.”

Tina's store of divine energy was rather pathetic really. It was impossible for her to work any miracles on a grand scale.

Yuuki considered for a moment, deciding it best to change the direction from which he was approaching the problem.

“Assuming this is indeed the fourth floor, Tina, can you feel the divine energy of the light fixtures on the floors above us?”

“Mm, let me try.”

Tina closed her eyes.

The first through third floors were illuminated by a series of Reliquia known as light stones. Although they were extremely common, they nonetheless still carried within them minute amounts of divine energy.

Divine energy which the Shinki were able to trace.

“Oh... you're right. I can definitely feel them. There are a bunch of tiny divine energy signatures spaced evenly apart. I'm guessing that's what you were referring to.”

“I see. That's good news.”

“Why do you say that?” Tina asked, clearly puzzled. “What have you realized, Master?”

“Oh, it's nothing major. It's just that we've managed to eliminate the worst outcome as a possibility.”

He now knew that the labyrinth's entrance was where it had always been. In other words, where they were now was where they had been before the phenomenon had taken place. It wasn't that their entire floor or even the labyrinth itself had been teleported to some strange dimension; the arrangement of the labyrinth had simply been thrown into disarray.

In other words, if worst came to worst, if they could provide Tina with enough divine energy, she could teleport them to safety.

Although the matter of whether they could actually find a way to gather that much energy was a whole other matter, it was still nice to have an idea of the scope of the phenomenon's effect.

Yuuki and Tina returned to join the rest of the group.

The children were surprisingly calm. Kaya seemed to have recovered.

"I have to say, it seems like as long as we're together, I'm bound to get caught up in strange things," Franka commented with a wry smile.

"No kidding. Last time was the same, wasn't it?"

Yuuki shrugged.

A month ago, Void Beasts which had no place being there had appeared on the labyrinth's third floor, along with a Void Dragon.

As he thought on the matter, he realized that there was someone missing from that time.

"...That reminds me, Franka, have you seen your brother lately? He ought to have made a full recovery by now."

"Oh yeah, Stefan. How is he?"

"He's under house arrest. —Well, to be honest, he's locked himself up in his room in the Oath Legion halls and refuses to come out. He denied my request to meet."

Franka's answer was accompanied by a complicated expression.

With that said, the gloom which had previously rested heavily upon her was now gone. She seemed to have already resolved herself to some plan of action or another with regards to her half-brother.

“I’m going to take it slow. There’s so much I want to say, after all.”

This time, her words came with a firm smile.

Yuuki nodded, thinking to himself that it didn’t seem like there was anything to worry about anymore.

“Well then. We need to figure out a way to return to the surface... What should our next step be?”

“Hmm...”

Alfred scratched his head awkwardly.

“Well, first things first, we need to secure a base of operations and then we should locate a water source. As for food, well, there’s always the meat of Void Beasts and the vegetation around us, should it come to that.”

“I agree. If this is really the fourth floor, then there are ought to be a plentiful supply of water around us. Unfortunately, with the topography as distorted as it is, that knowledge is rather meaningless now.”

Yuuki couldn’t help but sigh.

“As before, there’s not much we can do without exploring further. We’ll have to continue on, protecting the kids as we go.”

“...Right.”

Yuuki expressed his agreement. It wasn’t like they had any other options.

After resting for a bit longer, their party set off once more.

They continued slowly through the fourth floor. The labyrinth’s layout had been drastically altered, a piece here and a piece there, such that their maps and knowledge of room and road positioning were rendered entirely useless.

As they made their way along, they ran into several groups as desperately lost and confused as they themselves were.

From what little info they'd managed to share, they'd come to the conclusion that the phenomenon had caused identical effects everywhere within its reach. Although everyone was frantically searching for an exit, not a single party they'd run into so far had yet seen the stairway up.

It wasn't like their efforts had been entirely fruitless, though. From a party who had discovered a groundwater vein, they'd learned of a water source they could use.

"Hmm... Even though the labyrinth's all messed up, the water still flows normally. Just how does that work?"

Tina leaned in near the stream, eyeing it suspiciously.

Their current location was, as might be expected, no exception to the changes in scenery taking place every five meters. The strange thing was, rather than simply collecting in a pool as one would have supposed, it instead flowed freely. It suddenly appeared at the beginning of one boundary line, and five meters later, simply disappeared into another.

"Be careful not to fall in, Tina."

"Like I'd do anything that stupid—— Waaaa?!"

As she spoke, she lost her footing and was saved by Franka.

If nothing else, they'd at least managed to solve their water problem.

"Why don't we eat here?"

Following Alfred's suggestion, everyone refilled their water supplies and sat down to eat.

Yuuki offered to stand watch and sauntered off a fair distance from the party.

As he gnawed at his rock-hard piece of bread, he kept a constant eye on his surroundings, pondering anew their situation.

He came to the conclusion that the most effective plan of attack would be to leave the party here while he went off alone to scout.

Unfortunately, that plan had its fair share of problems.

If he were to break off from the party, there was no guarantee they'd be able to meet up again.

Were the phenomenon to repeat itself, even he might lose all sense of direction.

Furthermore, he worried about the danger the other party members might find themselves in were they to separate.

It wasn't that he didn't trust Alfred or Franka – far from it. That notwithstanding, they were exceptional “humans.” Here, in the labyrinth, there were a multitude of threats that were simply beyond their ability to handle.

One particular example came to mind – the legendary Void Dragon which had made an appearance just a short time before.

“If only I was still a Duelist...” he whispered to himself.

If he was a Duelist, their options would increase manyfold.

The minds of a Shinki and her Duelist were partially bound to one another. Regardless of the distance between them, they could both sense one another and communicate telepathically.

In this way, Yuuki had saved his previous master countless times, and she, in turn, had also saved him on numerous occasions.

The current Yuuki, however, was but a normal person. He had no master, no ScutumHoly Shield, and no protection from the effects of time. He was nothing more than a former Duelist, without the least trace of his former powers – nothing more than a normal human.

“...You can't be chosen as a Duelist again, Master?”

At some unknown point, Tina had found her way to his side.

It seemed she'd overheard his words.

“The Shinki’s summoning calls forth a Duelist to serve as her companion. At that time, the person who is to be her Duelist is chosen by the Heavenly King himself. That person is the one determined to be most suitable for the Shinki in question, no? In that case, if Tina really, really needed Master, then couldn’t you be selected as her Duelist?”



“Unfortunately not.”

“And why not?” Tina pouted. “Tina is being serious here——”

“Oh, I’m sorry. It’s not because of you.”

Yuuki gave a wry smile and placed a hand lightly on Tina’s head.

“It’s because of me. ——As I am now, I don’t meet the necessary conditions to be chosen as a Duelist. That’s why such a thing isn’t possible.”

“I see. Can I ask why? Is it because you were already a Duelist for another Shinki?”

Tina’s earnest tone stiffened a bit as she spoke.

“No.”

Yuuki paused for a moment before explaining.

“To be honest, the Duelists——”

He suddenly froze.

“Master?” Tina asked, mortified.

Yuuki didn’t respond. Instead, he narrowed his eyes and dashed off with a shout.

“Uncle, Franka, it’s a Void Beast! A huge one!”

The two reacted instantly.

Alfred leapt forward, Franka behind him.

“Over here, kids! Hurry!”

Yuuki and Tina raced back, and placed the children behind them protectively.

Before long, appearing from out of the darkness was something greatly resembling a caterpillar.

One surpassing two meters in length, that was. Stretching out from its main body were ten slender, insectile legs, wriggling disturbingly. Its grotesque appearance filled one with a deep, instinctual revulsion.

Because its legs were so large, its speed of movement was many times that of a normal caterpillar.

“Uck——”

Selim vomited.

“From the look of it, that thing ought to be pretty nasty. I’m guessing it’s venomous, so make sure not to get anywhere near it as we kill it.”

Yuuki intentionally kept his voice calm as he explained the situation, as if this was just another day in the classroom.

They couldn’t afford to panic, nor was there any need to. This he wanted to make sure they knew.

And indeed, a Void Beast of this level was something that Franka could easily dispatch with her Orisons.

No, the real issue was——

“This bastard shouldn’t even be here; this Void Beast lives on a level lower than this. When the labyrinth rearranged itself, I’m guessing that included the Void Beasts contained within as well,” Yuuki thought to himself unhappily.

If that was indeed the case, then things could get much, much more troublesome.

——Worse still, he had the feeling that things were only just beginning.

A small hill outside of Solitus.

Three figures stood on the hilltop overlooking the entrance to the labyrinth.

“——Good. This ends the first phase.”

The “Shinki who Scatters the Stars,” Elfriede, slowly lowered her arms.

She held a wooden cube gripped within her hand. Its size was roughly such that it could just about be enclosed entirely by a two-handed grip.

“Did it really work? That, what do you call it, ‘Void Marquetry’?”

Jahar squinted at it in disbelief.

“I’m different from you Shinki. I don’t really understand divine energy and whatnot, so I don’t quite get it.”

“If you’re so concerned about it, then ask your Shinki about it later. This thing only works on floors from the second and below. In this instance, the fourth through seventh floors are now a sealed space,” Elfriede answered emotionlessly.

The Reliquia, “Void Marquetry.” A most prized possession of the “Shinki who Scatters the Stars.”

Its ability allowed it to rearrange space within its area of effect. It could, for example, cause that which ought to fall down upon the ground to instead fall from the sky, or to cause someone to exit a room which they had attempted to enter.

This Reliquia was normally powered by a Divine Pearl, but in this instance, the enormous capacity of a Shinki had increased the range of its effects to rearrange the labyrinth itself.

This device acted according to its own will when producing its activated effect. For this reason, Elfriede surmised that its original purpose had been that of a toy which created a small-scale version of the labyrinth. It completely ignored the intended arrangement its wielder sought to impose.

For this reason, it was necessary to enact its ability more than once, starting from the largest scope and gradually narrowing its area of effect with each subsequent use, eventually trapping Tina and the others in a tiny, enclosed space.

“...It’s amazing how this thing poses no burden even with repeated use,” the Shinki murmured.

As compared to working a miracle directly, simply boosting the power of the Reliquia in her hand was far less draining.

Jahar would need to release his celestial Dragon Fang weapon in order to kill Tina and Yuuki. Such an action was extremely conspicuous. They could not afford to be seen, nor could they afford to allow their prey to escape.

For this reason, they had determined that the most effective strategy involved sealing them within the labyrinth, separating them if at all possible, and then dealing with them one at a time.

If all went according to plan, the next step involved Jahar teleporting over and executing the pair.

“For the moment, the divine energy possessed by the Sixth Shinki is pitifully small. However, if given more time, that will likely change. Contact that Moon Shinki of yours, and when the appropriate time comes, quickly end those two with the utmost haste. If others must be similarly dealt with in the process, then so be it. ——Am I clear?”

“...I don’t take orders from you, Shinki of the Stars. I’m the *Moon* Duelist.”

“Elfriede-sama can’t seem to help but put on airs,” Kai, who had been silent until now, interrupted. “You’re better off just thinking of it as the barking of a dog or the chirping of a bird. You’ll find it stops bothering you that way.”

In response to Kai’s abusive words, which paid not the least bit of respect to his Shinki, Elfriede glared at him. His warm smile never wavered.

“...Your relationship’s pretty bad, actually, isn’t it?” Jahar asked in surprise. “Let me express my gratitude for this opportunity, though. I’ll fulfill your

request. ——But putting that aside for a moment, I have to admit there's a question that's been on my mind this entire time. Perhaps you could answer something for me, El-chan."

"——El-chan?"

Paying no heed to her look of displeasure, Jahar continued.

"Your obsession with 'killing' in this incident strikes me as incredibly odd. I'm more than aware of the zero-sum nature of the relationship between the Shinki, and as such, your manipulation of Kaya-chan and myself comes as no surprise. That said, El-chan, your words and actions... they're very out of character for one of the Shinki."

"..."

"The way a Shinki thinks ought to be more straightforward, more kind. Am I wrong? Do you know how much work I've had to put into all of this?! That girl, even though it's her own life that hangs in the balance, is absolutely repulsed by all of this."

It was certainly a fact that the Shinki were engaged in a bitter struggle to the death. However, their primary responsibility was the safeguarding of the people. Accordingly, a kind and compassionate heart was one of their defining traits.

"Just now, you said that even if others were killed in the process, then 'so be it.' That thought is terribly inappropriate for one of the Shinki. That's much more like something that one of us Duelists would say. ——So what I want to ask is this: just why is it so important that those two '*must* die'?"

"...When one of the Duelists talks about life and death, it's quite a bit more persuasive, isn't it?"

Elfriede sighed before continuing.

"Simply put, it's because the Sixth Shinki is incredibly dangerous."

"Huh?"

Jahar frowned.

If she'd said it was the Duelist that was dangerous, then he could understand, but it made no sense for a Shinki to be considered a threat. The Shinki were incapable of harming other beings, after all.

"I'm guessing you want a more detailed explanation?"

"Of course."

The "Shinki who Scatters the Stars" considered his request for a moment, and then nodded.

"Alright then. Given that your Shinki's already in place by the Sixth Shinki, I guess there's no chance of you guys giving up on things now. ——Let me put it this way. If we fail here, then you, your Shinki, and even my Duelist and I – we're all dead."

"..."

Jahar didn't know what to say.

Elfriede wanted to laugh, but couldn't. Deep within the eyes of this Shinki, who possessed enormous and terrifying power, a terrible fear lurked.

"——Let me be the one to tell you. The Sixth Shinki? She has another name – 'The Serpent of Demise'."

Chapter 2: Chaotic Labyrinth



——How many days had it been since he'd last left his room?

Silently, Stefan Klose pondered this question.

He was a subordinate of the “Shinki who Supports the Heavens,” a young member of the Sky's Oath Legion.

The youngest child of the acclaimed Klose military family, he'd attained a first rank adventurer qualification at the age of fifteen. At the time, he'd been bestowed with a great gift in recognition of his status as a prodigy: a celestial Dragon Fang weapon, one of only twelve.

During the tragedy a month prior, when Void Beasts from deep within the labyrinth had been teleported to higher levels, he'd lost all the members of his party.

Although he'd suffered grievous injury in the aforementioned incident, he'd nonetheless survived. Because the elites of the Oath Legions were few enough to begin with, the loss of his party had been sore indeed – something he had been held responsible for.

However, even as he'd been censured, he'd been shown some measure of sympathy.

The labyrinth was a world beyond human understanding. When something unexpected happened, it was impossible to guarantee the safety of even the most experienced of adventurers. Furthermore, witnesses had attested to the presence of a Void Dragon even. Stefan, though highly skilled, was yet young; to blame him for everything would be cruel, some had suggested.

The sympathy and criticism of others mattered to Stefan not a whit; he had simply debriefed his superiors and then placed himself under house arrest. Even after making a full recovery, that had not changed.

Truth be told, it wasn't as if he felt it a matter of practicality nor was it part of some greater plan for the future. He'd simply lost all motivation to continue.

To be blunt, he just didn't care one way or another.

His comrades were all gone.

The target for which he'd sought strength and power for so long was similarly gone. The man who had killed his master was dead.

As far as he was concerned, there was no reason to ever set foot in the labyrinth again. It felt meaningless to seek after Reliquia to offer the Shinki.

Going further, he wasn't even sure there was a need for him to continue on as a member of the Oath Legions.

If he were to withdraw, he'd likely be reprimanded by his house for damaging the family reputation, but he'd never cared about such things in the first place.

—These thoughts had consumed his mind for days. The situation continued, unchanging, when suddenly...

"Hey Stefan, feel up to a raid?"

Karsten asked the same question each time he visited.

He was a man in the prime of his life who wore his hair closely-cropped. His appearance would not have been out of place on a farmer selling vegetables in the marketplace, but he was a party leader of the Sky's Oath Legion.

Rumor had it that he was the man responsible for suggesting that adventurers be recruited solely on basis of merit and not on who they knew or who their family was. This policy had been responsible for the growth of the Sky's Oath Legion into the dominant force it was.

His words and manner might have made him seem a rather frivolous person, but he was very popular.

"...I'm still reflecting on my actions."

“I know, I know. The problem is, something’s happened in the labyrinth again, and we need someone to scope out the situation. You’re fully healed, aren’t you?”

“My party is no more.”

“No problem. I have two new members to introduce to you.”

Stefan sighed.

“...I apologize, but I must decline.” In an even tone, he continued, “I’ve been thinking. What will I do next? What *should* I do next? I have yet to find an answer to that question, though. ——Lost as I am, I doubt I could be of any service to anyone.”

“Hmm...”

Karsten hawed and shook his head.

“This is pretty despicable of me, I have to admit, but I was going to have to let you know sooner or later...”

Stefan frowned. This was very much unlike Karsten’s normal, open self.

“What’s happened?”

“——To summarize the situation, the layout of the labyrinth seems to have been distorted. Neither the precise effects nor the scope of the phenomenon are known. Unfortunately, there were adventurers in the labyrinth at the time whose whereabouts are currently unknown. It’d be fantastic if they’re simply lost within, but the possibility that they are now trapped cannot be ruled out.”

Unfortunately for him, Karsten’s words hadn’t changed Stefan’s mind in the least. Suddenly, he was struck by a thought...

What was it that Karsten was having such difficulty voicing...? It couldn’t be——

“Yes. I see you understand.”

Seeing Stefan’s expression, Karsten nodded in confirmation.

“Your half-sister through your mother – the third-ranked cleric, Franka – is among those currently unaccounted for.”

Stefan headed to the city exit, toward the labyrinth entrance Karsten had indicated.

Each of the labyrinth entrances were currently watched by knights from the Church of the Five Holies, and closed off to any but those affiliated with the Oath Legions. They had judged the situation too dangerous for any but these most accomplished of adventurers.

Those standing guard recognized Stefan immediately, and so he passed through unmolested.

He looked around, surveying his surroundings.

There was no small number of Oath Legion members assembled. The elites of each Shinki’s Oath Legion had been summoned to investigate the situation, and they entered the labyrinth as he watched.

As he proceeded forward, cries of “*Hey, look over there,*” “*Still alive, eh?*”, and other such comments were heard.

The “genius” who had vanished from the public eye for the past month became the center of attention. Loudly, they called out insults and sarcastic comments which Stefan paid no heed as he made his way to the rendezvous point.

“Oh, hey, the Onii-san over there!”

Someone called out to him as he reached the corner just before the entrance itself, the designated spot.

A young girl was waving energetically at him. At her side was another young girl.

“Hey, hey, you – you’re Stefan Klose, right?” the girl asked, in a beautiful, clear voice.

She was a petite young girl of roughly fifteen or sixteen, with light, tawny hair and a bright, lively expression.

“...You guys are my new party members?”

“Whoa, amazing. So you’re just as cold as I’d heard!”

The girl giggled as Stefan frowned.

“You’re being rude, Lea...” the girl by her side remarked, in a subdued tone.

This girl looked to be about twenty or so, and was dressed in a long robe, with her long, black hair tied back behind her head. She was tall for a girl, but so slender she looked might break in two with a gust of wind. Hers was an ethereal beauty.

“Oh, my bad, my bad. You’re just so much like the rumors that I couldn’t help but say it out loud. —But yeah, to answer your question, we’re new members of the Sky’s Oath Legion. I’m Lea. I’m a third-ranked support specialist. The frail girl by my side is Serafina, a third-ranked cleric. It’s a pleasure, Senpai.”

“...We’re in your care.”

“My name is Stefan Klose.”

Lea laughed aloud once more at his words.

“Yeah, I know that! You’re a famous person, you know? The youngest person to ever attain a first rank and a spear-user.”

“...”

Her estimation of him was too high by far. He was, after all, strongly considering giving up the adventurer mantle. He wanted to say as much, but

realizing how childish such an action would be, he stopped.

“This is great, though. With you in our party, we don’t have anything to worry about. We’ve got this.”

Lea grabbed Stefan’s hand of her own accord, and shook it vigorously.

Although her words and manner were most brazen and ill-mannered... it was abundantly clear that she meant no harm. That was simply the kind of person she was.

Anyway, he was someone whose party had been annihilated under his watch. He didn’t have the right to be picky when it came to party members.

The girl ignored his reaction and continued to speak.

“I love to draw, so Serafina and I make a living mapping out the labyrinth. There’s only so much we can do with just the two of us, though.”

That was why the two had taken the exam for entrance into the Oath Legions, and eventually joined.

Of the maps and guides to each floor of the labyrinth, it was said that vast majority had been the handiwork of these two. Stefan personally relied on the Legion’s internal materials, so he’d never personally used anything they’d produced, but he’d nevertheless heard of them.

“Oh, by the way, let me just get the bad news out of the way first. I don’t want you to expect anything from us combat-wise. I’m pretty much only good at running away, but Serafina can be quite useful.”

“But... my Orisons... aren’t that battle-oriented...” Serafina whispered faintly, with her head bowed.

“We’re not here to fight anyway. Our priority is to investigate the abnormality.”

Lea nodded her head at Stefan’s words.

“Yeah, I’ve heard. Supposedly the layout of the labyrinth’s changed. The goal is to spread people out as much as possible and map the changes. That’s why we’re here. —Oh, that reminds me. The situation’s already been explained to me; I’m to debrief you.”

Lea’s explanation could roughly be summarized in the following manner.

Currently, the stairways and roads of the Magna PortaGreat Gate had been thrown into disarray. The reason for anomaly was unclear, but something had warped space, effectually rearranging the layout of the labyrinth.

When the phenomenon had occurred, clerics had reported having been struck by a strange feeling. Whatever it had been was undoubtedly the product of a massive working of divine energy.

The changes began at the second floor, although it was unknown how far down the effect went.

From the initial reports, it seemed the habitats of the Void Beasts had also changed, although this had yet to be confirmed.

Moreover, it was currently unknown if the changes were purely temporary in nature or if they were lasting. Only time would tell, particularly whether or not it might occur again.

Lea finished her explanation without interruption. Stefan was stunned; her explanation was extremely well-done, and was both clear and detailed.

“Hmm... Things look pretty troublesome.”

Mapping out the labyrinth once more would be terribly time-consuming, and if, Goddess forbid, the phenomenon should repeat itself, it was possible they would never return to the surface. Having come to this realization, more than a few adventurers had refused to enter.

(And that’s exactly why we have to do this.)

For all the adventurers trapped within who were desperately seeking a way back home.

“...Are you guys alright with this? The mission this time could prove quite dangerous.”

“There’s no such thing as a raid that isn’t dangerous. It’s okay. It’s precisely because it’s dangerous that we need to investigate the situation further, right? All of this is making my cartographer spirit burn, you know?”

Serafina nodded in agreement.

As far as Stefan was concerned, retreat was never an option.

“...Alright. Let’s enter the labyrinth now. You guys focus on drawing your maps, I’ll take care of any Void Beasts we run into. ——Let’s go.”

“S-So t-that’s why I’m s-scared.”

Edgar trembled.

“This is only the fourth floor, right? Void Beasts at this level should be pretty weak; there’s nothing to worry about.”

“But that caterpillar just now was huge,” Selim responded weakly.

“What’re we going to do if something even stronger than that comes out...?”

“Alfred-san will take care of it for us. Yuuki-sensei, you’ve been pretty useless until now, aha... ha.”

Edgar tried to laugh things off, but failed.

“...I want to go home...”

Selim’s words were almost a sob.

After the Void Beast had been killed, they’d continued forward once more. Unfortunately, the shock the two had suffered had been great.

Kaya, walking behind the two, also wanted to cry.

Although her reasons were different.

(What do I do? What do I do? It's already started...)

Anxiety and fear had gripped her heart.

She didn't know how he'd done it nor what his goal was, but she knew one thing – the changes to the labyrinth had been Jahar's doing. The plan to kill Tina and Yuuki had already begun.

I don't want to help. Let me go. Alas, escape wasn't an option, leaving Kaya uncertain what she ought to do.

Interrupting her thoughts, a voice sounded in her head.

「——How are things on your end?」

“Ah——”

Kaya almost screamed. Frantically, she clasped both hands firmly over her mouth.

「N-Nothing's really changed... I'm still together with Yuuki-sensei and Tina-san.」

「Where are you now?」

「On the fourth floor. We're looking for the stairway to the next level.」

「You haven't found it yet, though, right? Good. Looks like you guys are completely sealed in.」

Kaya felt like Jahar was laughing.

「W-What's going on? Also, what're you planning on doing next?」

「We're still making preparations. I'm going to have to ask you to keep up what you're doing already, Shinki-sama. I need you to inform me immediately if you guys change floors. ——Oh, one other thing. I think you know this already, Kaya-chan, but let me remind you not to allow your true identity to be discovered. If they find out who you really are, your end will be a tragic one. The predator will instead become the prey.」

「Oh...」

With that, the connection was severed.

The fear within her heart multiplied many-fold.

Kaya and Tina belonged to opposing factions, enemies in a struggle to the death. It didn't matter how hard or how long Kaya thought on the matter, it wouldn't change anything. To Tina, she was nothing more than a hated enemy.

Moreover, for the sake of victory, she was planning on ambushing them.

If that secret were discovered, forget Tina and Yuuki, even Alfred and Franka, as well as Edgar and Selim – all would be disgusted by her actions.

And then... death would come. It was only fitting that such a fate would await one who had sought the lives of others.

A weak Shinki – one who didn't even have an Oath Legion under her, one who jumped at her own shadow and could never decide on a plan of action – had no hope for victory. So Jahar had informed her. The right to “choose” was a right belonging solely to the “strong.”

For that reason, Kaya had entered into an alliance with the “Shinki who Scatters the Stars,” even knowing how unequal their relationship was. Kaya needed to labor diligently to improve their relationship, to serve her fellow Shinki as best she could, and thus be rewarded for her efforts. This was her first priority. Kaya wasn't good at dealing with Elfriede, but she needed to do her best here.

Jahar's words were pretty much dead-on. These things were necessary to claim victory.

However, Kaya was afraid. Both of killing and of being killed.

Regardless of the morality of her actions, Kaya lacked the courage to trade her life for another's.

"Something wrong, Kaya?"

A voice sounded in her ear. Tina had approached her without her noticing.

"You don't look too good. Are you scared?"

"..."

Kaya didn't know how to respond, so she nodded instead.

"Yeah, I understand. You don't need to worry, though. We'll make sure you guys get home safely. Although back on the surface, Master's just a pretty pathetic merchant, but here in the labyrinth, he's more than reliable."

Looking at the young man in question, Tina's expression was both proud and pleased.

"That goes for the two of you too, Edgar and Selim! There's no need to look so down. If you're never looking up, then life never will either."

Tina looked pretty worn out herself. That notwithstanding, it looked like her primary concern was to cheer everyone else up, to help them all feel better.

Deep within Kaya's heart, a feeling of guilt so strong that she couldn't ignore it rose to the forefront.

"——Please wait just a second."

Alfred gestured for them to stop.

The party drew to a halt.

When something unexpected occurred – such as running into a Void Beast – the haste of one's actions determined life and death. Edgar and Selim understood this as well.

Luckily, it wasn't a Void Beast that they'd encountered.

Yuuki walked to the front to see what had happened and made an unhappy pronouncement.

“...This isn't good. It's the stairway down.”

Everyone well understood the reason for the gloom that settled over his face.

They'd already explored the entire area, and what they could reach of the fourth floor, they'd already seen. This corner had been all that was left.

However, this, their last hope, had revealed not the stairway up, but rather the stairway down.

“Sealed in” – Kaya remembered that those had been Jahar's words.

“Heh. Looks like this labyrinth doesn't want to see us leave. We haven't heard anyone else make mention of the stairway up either.”

“I-It's still too early to decide that. Maybe there's a hidden room or road or something.”

“Even if there was, we have no idea where to even begin to look for such a thing. Anyway, we'd already taken that into consideration and having been watching carefully as we've made our way.”

“Oh...”

Yuuki's responses made Franka lose hope as well.

“So what should we do now, Yuuki? Should we head down and take a look? Given the situation, the level of danger ought to be roughly the same no matter where we go.”

The rules binding stronger Void Beasts to lower levels was a thing of the past given present circumstances. Whether they stayed on this floor or descended further, the danger they faced was more or less the same.

“Yeah, you’re right. It’s just that I have a bad feeling about heading further down. It’s almost like we’d be playing right into someone’s hands.”

Kaya knew just how accurate his assessment was, but she, of course, said nothing.

Yuuki thought for a moment before deciding.

“Alright, let’s take the stairs.”

“Is that okay?”

“Nothing will change if we simply wait here. ——Are you still okay to go on, Kaya?”

“Y-Yes. I’m fine.”

“Great. We should look for a way out while we still have energy to spare.”

Yuuki smiled faintly and, turning to face the others taking up the rear, told them to get ready to move.

Tina and Edgar were chatting quite happily. The two boys’ moods were much improved; her attempts to cheer them up had succeeded, it seemed.

“*Now that’s a real Shinki...*” Kaya thought to herself.

One who protected the people, delivering them from evil – a guardian of this world.

Watching Tina, Kaya was filled with a deep sense of longing – a mix of loneliness and envy.

The party descended the stairs, arriving at the fifth floor.

Kaya reported this change and promptly cut off the connection without waiting for an answer.

What would she do next? Or rather, what would Jahar do next?

The fifth floor looked just as the floor before it had.

To be precise, it, too, was an amalgamation of other floors, a warped mixture of the labyrinth's levels.

"I have to admit, I feel a little hopeless..."

As she walked slowly along, Franka sighed.

"Who can say what lies ahead? We should continue what we've been doing already by mapping out the floor as we explore."

Yuuki did his best to encourage everyone else.

Out of the blue, Kaya's vision distorted and her head screamed in pain.

—"It" had come again.

"—"

It was a bit better this time.

Just as the vibrations had begun to rock the labyrinth once more, he'd grabbed Tina and Kaya, who were falling.

"...Sorry Franka, I don't have any more hands."

"Oh, no, it's alright. I'm okay."

Franka stumbled a few steps, but managed to right herself.

"Mm. Tina's okay as well, Master."

“Don’t force yourself. ——How’re you, Kaya?”

“I’m fine,” she replied.

Likely because this was now the second time it had happened, everyone’s symptoms were milder.

Yuuki placed the two he’d caught in his arms gently onto the floor.

“Uh, Yuuki-sensei... behind us...” Edgar exclaimed.

Everyone turned to look behind them.

The stairwell they had just descended had vanished, replaced by a blank stone wall.

“...Everything’s been rearranged again.”

Yuuki clicked his tongue.

It wasn’t as though he hadn’t already considered the possibility of such an occurrence, but it still bothered him more than he cared to admit.

If it continued to happen, then any efforts to map out the new topology would prove futile.

However, the fact that staying where they were wouldn’t improve their situation hadn’t changed. Their small group decided to press forward and explore the fifth floor.

As compared to the fourth floor, their efforts this time were marked by ups and downs.

Everyone was pretty much accustomed to the strangeness of the terrain by now, and any Void Beasts were immediately repelled. Unfortunately, as they proceeded onward, the phenomenon continued to repeat itself time and again, leaving Yuuki and the others very unhappy.

None of the following changes were nearly as drastic as the first had been, though. Essentially only the scenery directly within their field of view seemed to have been effected.

Each change was a small one, along the lines of creating a corner ahead of them where there had been none before, or turning the road before them into a dead end.

Although they were constantly wandering around, eternally on the lookout for water, as time went on, they ran into fewer and fewer adventurers.

Indeed, they had not met another person at any point during their last two hours.

“——*It looks like someone’s trying to isolate us,*” Yuuki thought.

If he considered that this had been the goal behind the alterations made to the labyrinth, then things started to make sense.

It should be said that he hadn’t thought of this just now; no, this possibility had occurred to him immediately after the phenomenon had first evinced itself. Now, however, it seemed that this was indeed the answer.

This explanation did, after all, make far more sense than “some mechanism within the labyrinth suddenly activated on its own.” If someone was indeed behind this, then he’d just have to pull them out from behind the curtains and give them a sound beating and the problem would be solved. All that remained was deciding how to get them to reveal themselves——

“A Void Beast at 10 o’ clock!”

Franka’s shout interrupted his train of thought. These Void Beast ambushes had happened numerous times already.

Alfred and Franka raced forward to meet the attacker.

The children scrambled to the rear, hiding behind Yuuki. Because this had occurred many times already, the reactions of Edgar and company were fast and their motions practiced.

The two quickly put their enemies – fire breathing wolves – on the brink of death.

Yuuki wanted to avoid combat unless absolutely necessary, since action would risk exposing both his and Tina's true identities. That said, he would not risk Alfred and Franka's wellbeing simply to preserve that secret. Thankfully, such an occasion had not yet presented itself.

As they gradually ever more fatigued, however, he determined that once they'd exhausted themselves, he would need to act. Watching their actions, they yet had energy to spare, but there was a definite limit both to Alfred's stamina and Franka's satchel of Divine Pearls. They couldn't keep this up indefinitely.

He needed to figure out a way to seize a hold of their enemy before that limit was reached——

“Master! Over here!”

Tina.

Yuuki clicked his tongue and flipped around. He'd been too focused on the battle in front of him, and had forgotten to watch behind them as well.

A black shadow had appeared, a cloud-like enemy preparing to attack the children. It was an enemy often seen on the fourth and fifth floors – a swarm of especially large wasps that could be found only within the walls of the labyrinth.

“Get back!”

Tina grabbed Edgar and yanked him forward. A Void Beast of this level was utterly incapable of harming a Shinki, so there wasn't anything to worry about there.

“Aaaaah——”

A venomous wasp flew at the neck of an ashen-faced Selim, who was taking up the rear. Kaya, in an entirely unexpected display of bravery,

swatted it away.

Unfortunately, her action was accompanied by a shrill scream.

“Ah! Y-Yuuki-sensei! Selim——!”

It hadn't been a single wasp that had attacked him. This second wasp flew in from his blind spot, and stung him in the arm.

“Calm down, Kaya. ——Tina, help Selim treat his wound. Make sure you pull its stinger out!”

This type of wasp left its stinger behind in the victim's body, where it continually pumped venom into their bodies.

Yuuki gave Tina instructions before promptly charging toward the cloud of wasps. Fuming inwardly at his carelessness, he drew a dagger at his waist. His weapon flashed, and a wasp fell dead, its body split in halves.

In the blink of an eye, he'd slain the entire swarm. The job done, he turned.

“How is it? Anyone else stung?”

“Selim was the only one, and we've already removed the stinger. ——He was very brave; he didn't even cry.”

Tina patted the head of the boy beside her, his eyes brimming with tears.

Yuuki sighed.

“...I'm sorry. I was too careless.”

The strange new layout of the labyrinth meant that the territories of Void Beasts, which never before overlapped, now could, and thus attacks could come from multiple directions. He'd focused overmuch on the large threat before him, and had completely neglected to watch their rear.

“How are you all? Everyone okay?”

The lupine Void Beasts slain, Franka had rushed back to check on the others.

“Selim’s arm was wounded by a poisonous wasp. I’m sorry to ask you to have to exert yourself after a long fight like that, but could you help him?”

“Of course! Leave it to me.”

Franka took his arm and inspected the wound.

“The stinger’s... been removed already. This injury was caused when the stinger was removed, yes?”

“Yeah, because the stinger was buried within his arm, we had to cut it out with a dagger...”

“Well done. Poison will spread throughout the entire body whereas a knife wound like this one can be healed easily enough. —Okay, I’m going to heal you with an Orison. Please relax, Selim-kun. An injury like this just needs a bit of rest, and then it’ll be as good as new, don’t you worry.”

Franka removed a Divine Pearl from her satchel and focused. In a flash, the flesh on his arm had knit itself together and was made whole once more. Offensive and restorative Orisons were quite hard to do, but these were her specialties.

As Tina heaved a sigh of relief, Yuuki leaned in to whisper to her.

“...When you pulled out the stinger from his arm, how exactly did you manage to open his skin?”

“I used the knife you gave me when we entered.”

“That’s not what I’m asking. What I mean is, I thought you Shinki couldn’t harm anyone?”

“Eh?”

Tina tilted her head in surprise and puzzlement.

“I was so focused on what I needed to do to help him that I hadn’t realized it, but you’re right, Master. How *did* I do that?”

“...You were able to cut his arm because it was for the sake of helping him. If you didn’t realize you were causing any harm, then it seems it’s possible for you to do so.”

The “inability to harm another living being” was purely a mental block. If she hadn’t realized what she was doing was hurting someone else, then this restriction on her actions would not activate. Now that he thought about it, when she’d woken up earlier, she’d crashed into his jaw, inflicting pain upon him.

Although Selim’s wound was now healed, the party decided it was best that they took a break nonetheless.

If any venom were left in his bloodstream, then physical activity would precipitate its spread through his body, worsening his condition. In order to avoid this worst case scenario, they deemed it necessary to observe the situation for a time.

Yuuki placed Selim under Franka’s watchful care while he stood guard.

——Alfred suddenly sauntered up to Yuuki’s side.

“...How’re you holding up, Uncle?”

“Feeling pretty lively still.”

“This is the worst. Originally, I’d thought this was a simple job, and yet look how things have turned out.”

“Just think of these kinds of one-off jobs as a bit of recreation. In the larger scheme of things, continuity and stability are what’s important.”

“...I guess so.”

Yuuki sighed.

“You’re always mentoring new adventurers, Uncle. How’s the money?”

“I don’t rely on this to put food on the table, if that’s what you’re asking. Aside from duties with the training school, I have a long-term employer. If you ever change your mind about being an adventurer, I’d be more than happy to introduce you.”

“Forget it.”

Done speaking, Yuuki turned to face the children.

“The kids seem to be holding up alright. I’d figured they’d be pretty terrified after what just happened, but it looks like they get along well with Tina and Franka.”

Selim was lying on the ground, resting, with the others gathered around him.

“Not long ago, the ‘Shinki Crowned with the Moon’ and her Duelist, the noble Snow Blade King were very well-known. This story——”

Franka seemed to be sharing a story of the Duelists with the children. Selim, too, was an eager listener. From the looks of things, he seemed to be doing just fine.

“You don’t look very happy?”

“...”

Yuuki just grunted in response.

“Let me guess, you think Selim’s injury was your fault? It’s not like I can’t understand how you feel. ‘There’s more I could have done,’ ‘There’s more I *should* have done’ – you can’t blame yourself like that. If you’re simply reflecting on your actions, then that’s okay. But understand this – masochism and regret don’t change anything.”

“I know.”

It wasn't like he was omnipotent. In fact, he thought of himself as weak and powerless – as limited. No, perhaps “thought” was the wrong word; more like “recognized.”

But still... it was for that very reason that he didn't want to experience that ever again.

Franka's story involuntarily flowed into his ears.

“From that point forward, the ‘Shinki Crowned with the Moon’ and the Snow Blade King became bitter enemies. That was when the ‘Black Demon’ made his appearance. They fought, and the Snow Blade King was defeated.”

“Eh?! He lost! The Snow Blade King!” Edgar shouted.

“This isn't a story that's been recorded anywhere, so no one really knows, to be honest,” Franka replied with a wry smile. “Truth be told, there are many variations that are passed around. There are those who say that the Snow Blade King had grown tired of this world, and intentionally threw the fight. Others say that he had been harmed in the labyrinth first, and lost for that reason. The one thing we know for certain is that from that point on, the Snow Blade King ceased to appear and the Black Demon began to serve the Lunar Shinki in his place.”

“So what happened to the Snow Blade King then?” Selim asked, from his spot on the ground.

“Some say that he perished, and others that he was lost. I personally say it's the latter. It'd just be too sad otherwise.”

“Tina agrees! Mas – er, the Snow Blade King – is definitely still alive!”

Yuuki knew he was frowning. He wanted nothing more than to run over and give the loose-lipped Shinki a sound knock upside the head.

“Continuing on, thus the Black Demon became the new Duelist of the Lunar Shinki. He and the Snow Blade King couldn't have been more

different. Where the former's blade had been white, his was black. Not only did he refuse to lift a hand in aid of adventurers in need, if they got in his way, he slew them without the least hesitation. He became a most feared, hated existence."

"So um, did the Lunar Shinki-sama of that time not have anything to say about it?" Kaya inquired.

"Yeah, you'd think she'd be terribly angry, wouldn't you? Alas, anything she might have said has never been passed down. All we know is that one day, she suddenly disbanded her Oath Legion and ceased all action. From then on, there's been no hint of any activity from her. The Moon's Oath Legion is the only one that lies dormant these days. At the same time, the name of the Black Demon gradually faded from view. All this took place some five years ago."

"..."

Five years. Has it really been that long?

"With that, Franka's story is finished. Yuuki, we should go."

"...Mm."

Yuuki stood and smiled lightly.

"——Alright, you guys feeling better? Let's go."

"Um, are you really okay? Anything feel uncomfortable?" Kaya asked Selim as they walked along.

"Ah, no, I'm okay. I'm sorry Kaya, for inconveniencing you."

"Seriously, Selim. You're too weak."

Although Edgar's words right now were unconscionable, the blood had completely drained from his face when Selim had been stung.

“If you feel like you can’t go on, let us know in advance. We can’t let you become a burden to the party, so I’ll take care of you.”

“I said I’m fine.”

Listening to the two banter back and forth, Kaya heaved a sigh of relief.

Seeing how peaceful and calm Selim was, she finally relaxed.

At the same time, she also realized her limits.

——She was simply incapable of harming another.

She remembered Franka’s story about the “Shinki Crowned with the Moon.”

Kaya knew nothing of her predecessor. Although the two shared the same title, they were two entirely distinct persons, and thus their memories were their own.

And so she knew nothing of what had happened between the previous Lunar Shinki and her Duelist.

That deficiency notwithstanding, she did know one thing – the last Lunar Shinki had manifested her desire to avoid harming anyone.

——Should she follow that example?

“...Ohh?” Jahar muttered. “Kaya-chan isn’t picking up. She seems to be refusing me.”

“Is it possible that her identity was discovered and she was killed?” Elfriede responded.

“If something like that had happened, I would know. She’s still alive. She’s still moving too; I can tell. I think she’s just ignoring me.”

“It’s not unexpected.”

The Stellar Shinki nodded expressionlessly.

Indeed, Kaya’s decision was within the realm of her expectation, and so she had prepared a countermeasure.

“Alright then, as we discussed earlier, I’ll take control of things. And, as agreed upon earlier, this means your reward will be reduced.”

Jahar shrugged. *This, too, is for victory. So be it.*

“...If you’re going to cooperate, there are better ways.”

Elfriede looked down at the labyrinth entrance and whispered.

“This is all because of your cowardice. If you’re going to hate anyone, then hate yourself, O ‘Shinki Crowned with the Moon.’”

Chapter 3: Protected Things, Broken Things



“Hey, hey, over here——”

Lea reached out with both arms, taunting the enemy.

The foe in question was an enormous grizzly bear. However, this beast had three arms on each side of its body, for a total of six.

Each arm seemed to operate autonomously, attacking independently of the others.

Each attack was, however, skillfully avoided; at times Lea dodged by a hair’s breadth, other times she raised her dagger to deflect the blow.

The monster roared, frustrated at its inability to catch its prey. It kicked off the ground and charged her, seemingly intending to crash directly into her.

Lea threw herself to the ground an instant before the collision was to occur, narrowly evading the attack.

Its momentum propelling itself forward, the bear flew forward into a wide, empty space – where two others were waiting.

“I leave it to you, Sera~” Lea called out cheerily, as Serafina revealed a Divine Pearl and began to focus.

——In the next instant, the bear fell to the ground in an exaggerated manner.

That made things easy. Dispatching an immobile foe was beyond trivial.

“AmnisBlue Water Pike!”

Stefan called forth his weapon, piercing straight through the beast’s skull in a single stroke. Its massive body gave one final convulsion before ceasing movement.

“The beast is dead; nice! Good job you two——” Lea declared as she walked over to the other two.

She was covered from head to toe in scrapes and bruises, but showed no sign of any major injuries.

Giving the bear's corpse a quick glance, she frowned.

"...Ew, that's disgusting – its head's completely split open."

"That's what a celestial Dragon Fang weapon's like."

A legendary weapon capable of slaying even the gods. Its destructive potential was simply incomparable.

"Even so, those things have a mind of their own, right? For it to work so hard on your behalf, it must be quite fond of you, you know?"

"..."

Stefan turned his gaze to the spear in his hand. That was a thought that had never before occurred to him.

Now she mentioned it, he realized that if he left the Oath Legions, he'd lose this gift from the "Shinki who Supports the Sky."

——He'd feel rather lonely in that case.

The three were currently investigating the depth to which the phenomenon had taken effect.

Their journey so far had been surprisingly smooth.

The three's skills synergized quite well in combat.

Even if the appearance of Void Beasts had defied what had previously passed for common knowledge, they nonetheless had no difficulty dealing with these beasts. Small Void Beasts such as poisonous insects were quickly burned to ash by Serafina's Orisons. Larger Beasts such as the bear just now were handled in the same manner they'd used to slay the one just now: Lea acted as bait, Serafina sealed its movements, and Stefan dealt the killing blow.

Lea's acrobatic ability was simply stunning, and Stefan felt sincere admiration for Serafina's deft command of Orisons.

The Orison she'd just employed to get the bear to fall over had been an illusionary magic. For a beast which relied on its sight as it had, shifting the angle of its vision by 90 degrees had been more than enough to cause it to lose its balance. Comparing this technique to a more direct – and forceful – approach, not only was this method far more sparing of divine energy, in certain situations, it might prove far more effective.

——Getting this cleric of few words to explain as much, however, was another matter. Even with Lea's help, it had taken no small amount of time.

(...A cleric, huh.)

Stefan was suddenly reminded of another young cleric girl. He'd heard that she'd recently attained third-rank qualifications.

The time they'd been able to spend with one another as adventurers was pathetically small... Perhaps that might yet change in the future.

The lost adventurers had already begun to find their way back to the surface one by one. Their best guess was that the constant rearrangement of the labyrinth had finally opened up paths of escape for them.

Unfortunately, no one knew what had happened to the group he was most concerned about.

“This is the last floor. Yeah, we've sure seen a lot,” Lea commented as she opened a map.

The lines and words on the map were incredibly messy; Stefan could hardly believe she was able to piece anything together from that mishmash of scribbles.

“...Lea, please explain.”

Seeing Stefan's expression, Serafina came to his assistance.

“Right, right. —Because the labyrinth’s layout is in constant flux, I’ve long since given up on trying to map it out. Instead, I’ve been tracing out our path and trying to figure out the rules that guide the changes. This is what I’ve found.”

Flipping over her notes, she continued.

“This phenomenon takes effect in a portion of the labyrinth – roughly the first through the thirtieth floors – and divides up the entire area into smaller regions which are then rearranged. Everything – roads, rooms, even stairways – is affected.”

“And the cause?”

“Unknown,” Lea answered.

“There are several noticeable tendencies, however. First of all, the effect is focused. Look around us: this thirtieth floor is almost unchanged. The epicenter is above us; I’d estimate the third or fourth through the seventh floors.”

“I see.”

This info had already been passed on to headquarters. It was likely that even now they were focusing their efforts on investigating the specified area.

“Here’s where the situation changes. Look, we’re currently on the thirtieth floor, right? That makes the next floor down the 31st; I went ahead and checked it just now.”

Stefan and Serafina nodded.

The 31st through 35th floors were special. Rather than five separate floors with ceilings and floors, they were instead comprised of a massive stone pillar stretching the span. It would be impossible to mistake it for anything else.

“Well, that’s where the problem appears. If this is the thirtieth floor, how many sets of stairs did it take to get here?”

“Is it not thirty?” Stefan asked with a frown.

Counting the first stairway in from the entrance, it should take thirty sets of stairs to reach the thirtieth floor.

“That’s what you’d think, right? The problem is I’ve counted – and there are only 29.”

“I never noticed...” Serafina whispered.

“So what you’re telling us is that there’s a floor missing?”

“Exactly.”

Lea nodded in confirmation.

“Given that, the next question then is, ‘Which floor is missing?’ The most obvious suspect would be one of the floors that form the epicenter, namely the third through seventh floors. It’s quite likely that one of those floors has become isolated. Moreover, because we haven’t noticed any extra sets of stairs, it’s likely that space itself has become distorted.”

“There’s a possibility that... some missing persons are trapped within.”

“...”

Missing persons, was it?

“If we can find that missing stairway or perhaps a teleportation device of some sort——”

“We’ll break the floor.”

“...Huh?”

Lea’s mouth hung open in shock. Serafina blinked in surprise.

“That is both the simplest and most efficacious method. Even if the stairway isn’t present, but from what we’ve seen, the floor itself ought to be where we

expect. That being the case, then we should be able to reach it from above. We can't not reach it. Rather than wasting our time on what could be exploring in vain, this way is far faster."

"Wait just a——"

"First things first, we need to see how big a hole we can open up with Orisons and offensive-type Reliquia. If that doesn't work, we'll just have to have people dig a——"

"Wait, wait, wait. Stefan, you need to calm down, alright? Are you trying to destroy the labyrinth?"

"It's nothing major; we're just digging a hole in the ground, after all. I'm already calm."

"...I'm happy to hear that, but please calm down more than you already are."

Lea waited for a moment before continuing.

"First of all, even if you did that, you'd have no guarantee of actually breaking through to the target area. This is the labyrinth, you know? We have no idea what the structure between floors is like."

"..."

"Furthermore, even if you did succeed in making a hole to the next floor, it's possible that the act of excavation could cause a cave-in right above the very people we're trying to save. Worst-case scenario? We cause the entire floor to collapse."

"..."

The rational part of Stefan's mind echoed her words.

"I never would have guessed that you'd simply act without thinking like that... You seem rather anxious?"

“Is that how I look?”

Lea and Serafina nodded in unison.

“...I hadn’t noticed myself. That said, my sense of things more often than not differs from others; I’m very aware.”

“Losing your calm while maintaining a poker face like that can’t be good for you. Anyway, I have an idea. Let’s head back to the surface and then investigate more carefully this time.”

“...”

Serafina seemed to be in agreement.

“There’s no need to worry. Your sister’s an amazing adventurer, right? Don’t worry – she’s definitely okay.”

“...?”

Stefan frowned at Lea.

“Hmm? Oh, your sister? I heard about it from Leader.”

“That’s not what I was wondering about. ——I hadn’t said once that I was ‘worried about my sister.’ Why would you think that?”

This time it was Lea’s turn to furrow her brows.

“Are you some kind of idiot or something?”

“...What do you mean?”

“No, never mind. Sorry.”

Lea sighed. She looked utterly flabbergasted.

“Anyway, what do you think about my proposal? I think we can get at least gather the latest intel that way.”

“...Alright.”

“I understand. Then let’s head back for the time being.”

The three returned to the stairway up.

Their journey was without incident, and they only encountered a handful of Void Beasts.

“...I don’t think I’m worried,” Stefan murmured as they walked.

Lea looked over.

“About your sister? Wait, don’t tell me you’ve been thinking about that this entire time?”

“I once had a goal. For that purpose, I trained endlessly and became an adventurer. However, my goal, that which I sought after... everything’s lost its meaning.”

Lea and Serafina didn’t speak.

“That girl – she is all that remains of my hopes.”

The pain and sorrow that came from losing someone precious. She was his family, the only person he could share this with.

“I think the reason I’m so concerned about her is because if I lost her as well, then nothing I’ve ever done would have any meaning. That’s why I don’t think ‘worried’ is the right word. I just... want to save her, for my own sake.”

Stefan was no more talking to them than he was to himself. As he spoke, those uncertain feelings that had long lingered in his heart slowly grew clearer.

So when Lea spoke up, he was somewhat surprised.

“That’s what we call ‘worrying.’”

“...”

“Reasons might vary, but that feeling of wanting to help someone else doesn’t change, right? That’s what we mean by ‘worrying.’ —Regardless of the reason, the desire to be of service to someone else has a worth all of its own. There’s no need to overthink things to this degree.”

“...Is that so?”

“Yes, just so. I said it, so it can’t be wrong. —But seriously, here I am speaking such deep and profound truths and your expression seriously hasn’t so much as twitched. Do you not think anything of what I said?”

It wasn’t that he didn’t, but rather that he didn’t know what expression he should be wearing right now.

So he asked.

“Can I ask why you two are doing something like this?”

“What’re you referring to?”

“Does drawing maps make you happy?”

“Ah...”

Lea considered his question for a moment before finally answering.

“Rather than happy... I should say that I want to leave something behind. There’s nothing wrong with people’s memories, but if everyone that knew you passed on, then wouldn’t any trace of your existence be gone? That thought makes me lonely. Although I draw maps because they’re a necessity, the truth is that I also write stories and plays.”

“And you, Serafina?”

“I, um, I was... dragged into this by Lea...”

“Once this girl starts writing, she becomes a real chatterbox. It’s a sight to see, let me tell you,” Lea retorted.

“Our guides to the labyrinth are all written by her, I’ll have you know. She’s even written some romance novels recently!”

“L-Lea, t-that...”

“It’s nothing to be ashamed of. When we get back to the surface, you should give Stefan a copy. I’ll tell you now – her book’s pretty popular right now, you know?”

Suddenly Lea froze.

A strangely serious expression took hold of this bubbly girl.

“...You have to be kidding me. What the hell are you thinking——” Lea muttered, looking up at the ceiling.

“What’s the matter? Is something wrong——”

“Stefan! Over here! Get down!”

Just as Lea screamed warning, a loud roar sounded as the labyrinth shuddered violently, throwing Stefan into the air.

——She was ready for death.

Her ears filled with the sound of falling rocks, and a cloud of dust obscured her vision.

Originally, she’d been on the floor, but now she was thrown about in mid-air, like a leaf flitting about at the mercy of a whirlwind.

——Just how many times had it shook?

As her consciousness returned, she noted that her surroundings had fallen silent.

“Ow...”

Franka struggled to rise, enduring the pain that shot through her body as she did so.

What had happened? She struggled to pull her thoughts together, and slowly the memory came to her.

An intense, forceful shaking had savaged the area their party had been in, throwing them off their feet. She hadn't had the luxury of worrying about others while the incident was ongoing.

The walls had broken, turning to rubble which had fallen all around them. She'd been struck... and that was all that she remembered.

From the looks of it, she hadn't been out long. The dust from the cave-in still filled the air, making it hard to see.

Franka leaned against the wall for support, and, using an Orison, created a source of light.

She surveyed around her——

“——”

What she saw left her speechless.

All around her lay broken slabs of rock the size of a full-grown adult, perhaps the remains of what had once been the walls and ceiling of the labyrinth. Had anyone been unfortunate enough to have been trapped beneath one, death had certainly found them.

“Y-Yuuki-san! Master! Anyone——”

“——Franka?”

The voice of a young man answered her call.

“Yuuki-san! Thank goodness... How’s everyone else?”

“I’m not sure. They should be around here——”

Yuuki’s voice faded, as he was unwilling to give voice to other possibilities. Franka mirrored that sentiment.

A small frame slowly rose, coughing.

Franka turned to look, heaving a sigh of relief.

“Kaya-chan... are you okay?”

“I’m alright. Edgar and Selim are over here.”

Franka and Yuuki ran over to look them over.

The two were caught in a narrow crevice formed by two slabs of rock. They’d narrowly avoided being crushed by these enormous slabs of stone – a miracle.

“They’ve just fainted, thank goodness. ——That leaves...”

“Uncle and... Tina,” Yuuki replied in a sober tone.

When the shaking had begun, the two had been walking together, at the front of the group. Because Franka had been caring for Selim’s wound, Tina had been lighting the way in her stead.

Franka and Yuuki extricated the two children from where they rested, and gave them to Kaya to watch over while they went off to explore.

In what might be considered a stroke of luck, they found no sign of the two.

Had they been caught under one of the falling stones, or perhaps——

“...Over there. Quickly, look over there,” Yuuki commented unhappily, pointing.

He was pointing at a wall – one that hadn't been there before the shaking started.

“On that note, just after the shaking ended, I was struck by the same headache and ringing in my ears as before... In other words, the shaking and the alterations occur one after another. Uncle and Tina have been separated from us, huh?”

Franka looked to Yuuki for direction.

“...The first thing we need to do is get these kids back to the surface. That's our priority here.”

Yuuki spoke in a dull monotone, stifling the emotions raging within him.

“If we dilly-dally here, then we might just get in a second cave-in. I don't think Tina or Uncle would forgive us for making such a mistake. We need to go, and quickly.”

“R-Right.”

“I'll carry Edgar and take the lead. You take Selim and follow me, Franka. Kaya, you help Franka carry her stuff and the lantern. ——You had better stay close.”

Just what had those final words meant? Kaya's expression stiffened and she nodded strongly.

Their group advanced through the treacherous terrain as one.

By the time they arrived at the summit of the floor, there had already ceased to be any trace of a cave-in. The quaking had been extremely localized.

“...Is there a way out?”

Franka immediately regretted asking. Her anxiety had overcome her, causing her to ask this most meaningless of questions. It went without saying that Yuuki had no more idea than she whether or not such a thing existed.

Strangely, however, he answered.

“I’m looking for the stairway up. If my guess is correct, I think we’ll find it.”

“I-I see. Why——”

Do you know? she had wanted to ask, though she cut herself off mid-sentence. ——Because he’d continued to speak.

“...I can still do better. There has to be a better solution to all of this. That’s what I’ve been telling myself ever since that happened. How many times must this repeat itself? I seriously haven’t improved one bit.”

His words carried within them a profound sense of regret.

Franka didn’t know what she should say in such a situation.

Should she comfort him?

Tell him that it wasn’t his fault?

——No, such words would not salve his torment.

In any event, did she even have the right to do such a thing?

In the end, she decided to hold her silence, sighing at her own weakness, as she continued forward.

“Ah——”

Suddenly, Kaya called out.

A Void Beast had appeared, and it was of a type that made its residence below the tenth floor.

It was an organism that had no analogue in the world above. If it had to be described, it might be likened to a tusked rabbit.

However, its size was that comparable to that of a small child and its speed was nearly impossible to follow with the naked eye.

“Yuuki-san, I’ll——”

Bind its movement with an Orison, Franka had been about to say, but what she saw left her speechless.

A faint sound, like the puncturing of a bag of water, sounded, and the beast fell to the ground, dead.

Yuuki held Edgar in one arm, his dagger in the other.

From the scene before her, it was obvious that Yuuki was responsible. He’d drawn his dagger and killed the monster, slicing it into quarters.

The terrifying thing was that it had all been done in a literal blink of an eye. Not only had Franka failed to catch the moment when he’d cut the beast, as far as she was concerned, he hadn’t moved at all.

This was far beyond what even Alfred or Stefan were capable of. Never before in her life had she witnessed such exquisite swordsmanship.



——No.

(I've seen this once before...)

It was when she'd encountered the legendary Void Dragon and had sunk into the depths of despair.

Just then, both she and her brother had been saved.

“...Let's go.”

As prompted, their party set off once more.

Weathering the silence for a time, Franka finally resolved herself.

This wasn't the time to keep quiet. Nor was this the time to worry about either hurting another or being hurt. She didn't think she could claim to know him thoroughly, but she was at least confident enough to say that this was necessary.

Three times she slowly inhaled and exhaled.

(——Okay.)

She sped up, catching up to him.

“There's... something I'd like to ask, is that alright with you?”

“...What? Is it really something you need to talk about right now?”

“Yes. It's very important.”

He offered no more resistance, so Franka took his silence as acceptance.

“So um, I heard from Tina-chan earlier, but... Yuuki-san, there was a girl you were close to before? What kind of person was she?!” Franka gasped out in a single breath.

“——Uu”

“...?”

“Uwahahahahahahaha! The heck is that?!”

Yuuki burst out laughing.

The wry smile on his face notwithstanding, he'd returned to the Yuuki that Franka knew and was familiar with, all trace of his former gloom gone from his face.

“...Seriously though, that girl just doesn't know how to keep her mouth shut. When we get back, I'm going to have to teach her a lesson, maybe make her skip a few meals.”

“P-Please don't be angry with Tina-chan... U-um...”

“Ah, yeah. There certainly was someone like that. ——Before, I... wasn't really a good person.”

Yuuki stared off into the distance.

“Truth be told, I was party to some pretty terrible things... At the command of my superiors, I committed numerous sins. That was the kind of place I grew up in. Not once did I question the morality of my actions. Later on, I was granted the opportunity to realize what I had become. ——I was a tool. I was simply being exploited by others, unfit even to be labeled 'human.'”

“That...”

“I was filled with regret.”

His voice was steady.

“The life I'd lived filled me with a deep, deep sense of regret. Deep within my heart, I thought that I'd pay any price for a second chance. It was then that she took me in. She was such a strange one: proud, resolute in her ideals, and – at times – willful, like a small child. ——She was the one who taught me what it meant to be human.”

“And where is she now?”

“Dead.”

That a single word could contain such immeasurable sorrow.

“To express my gratitude, I told her I’d protect her, but I couldn’t keep that promise. She died because of me.”

“...”

“That’s why now that Tina and Uncle are separated from us, I’m feeling a bit down. If I could just find my way back to their side, I’d protect them. It’s alright, though. I’m feeling better now.”

“...Thank goodness. The look on your face was so strange I was starting to worry.”

“Franka, you——”

“Hmm?”

“...No, never mind. Thank you.”

The bright, carefree smile which usually adorned his face made its return.

Franka thought to herself that perhaps he’d seen through her.

The topic she had just broached was a painful one for him, and so it wasn’t one she’d talk about lightly.

So why had she intentionally raised the issue? She’d wanted to distract him from his worries, even at the cost of risking his anger.

He’d begun to lose himself in a cycle of blame and guilt, a storm of internal strife in which he’d be lost. For that reason, she’d had to draw him “out.”

Franka had noticed something.

The strange recurring phenomenon was the product of someone intentionally targeting their small party.

If that was indeed true, then his battle... was not yet over.

Even if it meant he'd be angry with her, as long as his focus was turned outward, he'd be able to recover. He had to.

And thus Franka had intentionally set out to trample upon the grounds of his heart.

Even if he resented her for it, hated her for it, she preferred that to watching him lose himself in guilt.

——That had been Franka's thoughts on the matter.

“Stairs!”

Franka raised her head at Kaya's shout.

The stairway up for which they'd been searching for what seemed an eternity was now before them.

“As I thought.”

Yuuki turned to look at Franka.

“That should lead to the fourth floor. Things should be alright from here on. I'm sure the Oath Legions are even now investigating the situation. You just need to find them, and they'll get you guys back to the surface. I'm sorry, but——”

“I know. I can handle things from here. Leave the kids to me.”

Franka forced herself to laugh.

Yuuki blinked in surprise, never having expected her to understand so quickly.

“You’re going to save Tina-chan and Uncle, right? I’ll have to leave things to you. The two of them are very important to me.”

“...Yeah, leave it to me.”

“I-I’m going too.”

Kaya made her way to Yuuki’s side, trembling all the while, her head bowed.

Franka wasn’t surprised. She, too, must possess “something.”

The world they lived in and the world she lived in were too different; she didn’t have the qualifications necessary to set foot on that side of things.
——At least for now.

Yuuki walked a few steps and then turned back.

“Franka. Thank you. Really.”

“Oh, um, you’re very welcome...”

Franka couldn’t speak, and instead sent the two off with her eyes, before finally heaving a sigh.

“Now then, it’s just about time to return to our normal lives. Edgar– and Selim-kun seem just about ready to wake——”

Franka frowned.

Several Void Beasts had appeared, the same kind as the tusked rabbit that Yuuki had killed earlier.

It looked like they were planning on having a meal now that the troublesome person had left, or perhaps they were desiring to avenge their fallen comrade.

“My apologies.”

Franka gripped a Divine Pearl as she gave a wry smile.

“——But I’m not going to lose.”

An enormous conflagration enveloped the Void Beasts, turning them to charcoal.

Two had managed to escape the flame’s wrath, however. Her extreme exhaustion had caused her aim to suffer.

“You——!”

The Void Beasts prepared to attack once more. *Am I going to make it——?*

A gale of wind suddenly blew by.

The twin Void Beasts, preparing to charge their foe, were instead cut into two halves which fell lifelessly to the ground.

Franka turned back, catching sight of a certain person.

Said person held the celestial Dragon Fang weapon AmnisBlue Water Pike in his hands. It was the first-ranked adventurer known as a prodigy, a person most familiar to Franka.

“...Nii-san...”

“Are you hurt?” Stefan asked expressionlessly.

“I’m okay. ——That sure gave me a shock. This is so sudden.”

“...”

“What brings you here? Are you investigating the abnormality?”

“...Yes.”

The quaking just now had separated Stefan from his party members, so he’d continued the investigation alone.

Although he’d found himself surrounded by no small number of dangerous Void Beasts, as far as Franka’s brother was concerned, he hadn’t been in any

danger whatsoever.

Once upon a time, Franka had felt that her brother's stony expression was so grave as to be frightful.

She didn't feel that way anymore.

"I apologize for disrupting you while you're working, but do you think you could help me take these kids back to the surface?"

"..."

Wordlessly, Stefan took the children into his arms. At long last, Franka felt peace settle over her.

"...Um, Yuuki-sensei?" Kaya asked. "How long ago... did you notice?"

"I began to suspect you right after the anomaly first occurred. The huge working of divine energy affected you very harshly, much more so than it did Franka; it affected you almost exactly the way it affected Tina, in fact. There's no way a human could be that sensitive."

"..."

"My suspicions were confirmed when you were protecting Selim. When you swatted the wasp away with your hand, it stung you, and yet you were completely unharmed."

Kaya blinked.

"You saw that...?"

"Please don't look down on the motion vision of a former Duelist. The nail in the coffin came when Franka was sharing the story of the Shinki with all of you. 'Did the Lunar Shinki-sama of that time not have anything to say about it?' you said. 'Of that time' – those were your words. In other words,

you know that there are multiple Shinki of the Moon. ——Because we're short on time, I'm going to have to ask you directly: which Shinki are you?"

"...The Moon."

Kaya shrank as she responded.

"...So you're Muriel's successor, huh?"

Yuuki stifled the pain that filled his heart. This wasn't the time for such things.

"Your plan was to separate Tina and myself and ambush us once we were alone, am I right?"

"Yes..."

Kaya sighed dejectedly and continued.

"This plan was devised by my Duelist – Jahar-san. Do you know him, Yuuki-sensei?"

He had indeed heard that name before. A moment's consideration brought the memory to mind.

He'd been a member of Stefan's party, a dark-skinned young man who wielded a huge blade.

With this, many things fell into place. So he'd been under watch for that long.

"When the time was right, I was to teleport Jahar-san here. Afterward, Yuuki-sensei... and Tina... one by one..."

"We'd be killed. So he has a celestial Dragon Fang weapon then. ——You haven't teleported him over yet, correct?"

Kaya nodded.

“The shaking and alterations to the labyrinth – what caused them?”

“I don’t know either. Perhaps Jahar-san used some kind of Reliquia.”

All this Shinki had been responsible for was watching over them and teleporting Jahar when the moment came.

Now that he thought about it, the Moon’s Oath Legion had been disbanded. She didn’t have any subordinates she could rely on.

In that case, they’d better meet up with Tina and Alfred as soon as possible

“U-Um...”

Kaya looked at Yuuki through fearful eyes.

“What’s up?”

“A-Are you... going to kill me now?”

“Huh?”

“Jahar-san said... He said... that it was only natural that people who would kill others... would be killed themselves. I... think so too.”

“Do you want me to kill you?”

She shook her head with great force.

“Then I won’t. Anyway, you’ve had it rough too. The reason I figured things out was because you protected Selim. Also... that cave-in just now, I know that you saved us with your powers.”

“...”

The fact that Yuuki and company hadn’t been caught in the rain of falling rubble was no coincidence.

He presumed that Tina had also tried, but her frankly pitiful store of divine energy would have been unable to produce the effect they'd seen.

“On the contrary, let me thank you instead.”

Tears began to run down her cheeks.

“I... I never wanted anyone to get hurt...”

“I know.”

Yuuki nodded.

“You haven't teleported your Duelist over, after all. Plus, you've revealed everything without trying to run from the responsibility. —All that tells me that you're done doing things that way. Oh, that reminds me – how much divine energy do you have left?”

“Eh...? Oh, not that much, sorry...”

“That's okay. I'll need your help then. We need to bring Tina and Uncle here. If you have the energy for it, can you teleport them here? You could also break down the walls between us, if that works better.”

Yuuki walked over to a dead end. Kaya obediently followed behind.

“...Um...”

“Yes?”

“Yuuki-sensei, can I ask you – a Duelist – something?”

“Make that former Duelist, but sure.”

“The Duelists are people who protect the Shinki, right?”

“Yes.”

“So why doesn't Jahar-san protect me then? He doesn't listen to me at all, and his personality's terrible... If I think about it, we're nothing alike.”

Yuuki pondered her query for a moment before answering her with a question of his own.

“Let me ask you something. Why do you think the Duelists protect the Shinki? There’s no way they do it without hope of reward, right?”

“Hmm...”

Kaya’s face clearly demonstrated the depth of her perplexity.

“...I’ve never thought about that before. The only answer I can think of is that it’s the Heavenly King’s will.”

“If I had to describe the Duelists, I’d say that almost without exception they are terribly powerful... and also broken,” Yuuki replied, reflecting on his own experience.

“When I say broken, I mean to say that we’re all somehow deficient. At one point, each and every one of our souls cried out that that defect might be fixed, and it was in that state that we were summoned to this world. We are then paired with the Shinki that has the ability to heal what ails us.”

“Heal...?”

“In return, the Duelists protect the Shinki. I’m sure you’ve heard that the ‘most suitable person’ is chosen as Duelist, right? This is what that saying means.”

“I don’t really understand...”

“Every Duelist has ‘something they want to do’ or ‘something they want to receive.’ The Shinki are responsible for realizing that dream. That’s basically what I mean. —You heard what I said to Franka earlier, right? I was once nothing more than an unthinking, unfeeling tool; I knew nothing of what it meant to be human. All of this Muriel, the previous ‘Shinki Crowned with the Moon,’ gave me. It’s because of her that I now live a normal person’s life in the city.”

“...And what is it that I can do for Jahar-san? If you ask me what it is he lacks, all that comes to mind is that he refuses to listen to me?”

“I’m not him, so I can’t say. ——Think about what it is he wants more than anything... you must have some clue, no?”

Kaya thought for a moment.

“He... always talks about ‘obtaining victory.’ He wants to ‘fight, and seize victory.’ That’s why he’s always angry that I have no desire to fight.”

“That’s it then.”

Had he once failed, searing regret into his heart?

Perhaps he was even now seeking redemption as Kaya’s Duelist.

On the other hand, the Shinki standing before him clearly despised conflict; she wasn’t the type to fight to win.

Maybe he was looking at it all wrong.

“I’m so tired of all of this...”

Kaya laughed weakly and heaved a sigh.

“I’m sorry... There’s no point in complaining to my enemy, Sensei.”

She looked so young, but she was wise beyond her years and bore a heavy sense of responsibility.

Even though she knew what kind of situation she was in, and the dark future she’d chosen for herself, she hadn’t sought to escape that responsibility.

Yuuki scratched his head awkwardly.

“...Let me ask you something. What do you want to do right now?”

“Huh?”

“When things go wrong, the first thing to do is set a short-term goal for yourself. That’s what the Gramps who taught me business always said.”

“...If things were to go smoothly for me, that’d be bad for you, Yuuki-sensei. Should you really be telling me something like that?”

“Hearing something good makes you wary, huh? Business might just be a good fit for you. Much more so than mine, anyway.”

Yuuki smiled wryly.

“——Whether you’re a Shinki or my enemy or whatever, none of that changes the fact that you’re my student. Teaching you is my job. Does that reasoning work for you?”

“...”

Kaya didn’t know what kind of expression to wear as she stared numbly at him. Finally, she bowed her head.

“I... want to have a sincere talk with Jahar-san.”

“That’s a good choice.”

The reason she wanted a “sincere” discussion was because she knew she hadn’t tried her best either. If she’d come to that realization, then chances were that things might yet change.

“Right. First, I need to find Tina and Alfred, and bring them home. Are you coming?”

The “Shinki Crowned with the Moon” gave a firm nod.

Just then——

“...Kaya?”

Yuuki frowned.

She'd suddenly frozen up.

"Why...?" she whispered, her face ashen. "I hadn't heard a thing... I haven't done anything..."

"Calm down. What's happened?"

"...Teleported."

Kaya's eyes finally returned to meet Yuuki's.

"Jahar-san is already where Tina is."

"Grr——"

Tina humphed as she stared down the object in their way.

"What a pain! It's in our way!"

"...You can get mad all you want, but I get the feeling the wall doesn't mind," a droll voice called out from behind her.

"Just forget it. There's nothing you can do, anyway."

"Hmph. I guess you're right. There's no need to worry, Alfred. Master will come for us."

Tina had the utmost confidence that that was true.

Alfred was right that there wasn't anything they could do in this situation.

The violent shaking earlier had caused a cave-in. She'd used her divine energy to protect the party, and the exertion had left her nearly depleted.

Once the quaking had finally subsided, they'd found themselves cut off from Yuuki and the others. Given the discomfort the experience had subjected her to, the labyrinth-altering phenomenon had likely occurred again.

Alfred and Tina had already explored all there was to see of the space they found themselves in; it hadn't taken much time. There wasn't all that much to see, truth be told.

The walls were laden with bioluminescent moss, so their surroundings were clearly visible even without a lantern. The light illuminated a broken-down room of some fifty square meters without any doors.

In other words, they were trapped. The one small blessing of their situation was that at least they did not have to worry about Void Beasts.

However——

(...Just after the shaking stopped, I felt the powers of several Shinki activating.)

If she had to say it, then yes, she was worried. That said, she didn't have any divine energy left at her disposal; even if she wanted to investigate further, it simply wasn't an option.

When it came down to it, all they could do was wait to be rescued.

“...You know, you really trust Yuuki, don't you, Tina-chan?”

“Yeah. Master is worthy of Tina's trust.”

She stuck her chest out proudly.

“...You don't find him frightening?”

“Eh? Well, sure, when Tina makes a mistake counting the bill or accidentally breaks store inventory, then yeah, he's scary. On those days, dinner shrinks a dish, after all. If that's not to be feared, I don't know what qualifies.”

“I see.”

Alfred revealed a bitter smile.

“Still, I have to say that was a strange question, really. Are you afraid of Master then, Alfred?”

“...I don't know.”

His tone changed.

“If the feeling of awe at overwhelming strength and frightening talent can be classified as ‘fear,’ then yes, I am. However, just like those who wield power can vary, the ways in which that power is wielded can vary as well. In that sense——”

The latter half of his words seemed to be directed more to himself than to Tina.

Tina was left thoroughly bewildered; she couldn't make heads or tails of what this man was saying——

Suddenly, she stiffened.

“——Watch out! Behind you!”

Alfred drew his weapon as she cried out. The metallic clank of metal against metal sounded, and blood sprayed into the air.

“Ohh? Those reflexes of yours aren't half bad. What were you called again? Al... Alf?”

Before them stood a man wielding a gigantic sword.

“My name's Alfred. I appreciate the compliment.”

The calm manner in which he responded belied the ill look of his face. His armor had been cut open from his shoulder downward. Blood flowed freely from the wound.

“You were a member of Stefan's party once, weren't you? You disappeared during the incident with the Void Dragon; everyone was under the impression you'd died.”

“Just call me the Immortal Jahar.”

Jahar laughed unconcernedly.

His face was familiar to Tina.

Not only did she know his face, but she also remembered how he'd attacked her without so much as a warning.

“Again, it's you! And just as contemptible as always! What's your problem? Don't tell me you've caught some strange sickness that compels you to attack others lest you die?”

“I definitely haven't heard that particular explanation before, but it's true that seizing the initiative does indeed lower the risk of death. Oh, let me just say this first – my target's not Alfred over there.”

“...Your name was Jahar, right?”

Tina's eyes narrowed.

“You teleported here. You serve one of the Shinki?”

“Wonderfully deduced. Yes, I'm a Duelist. ——Now that we're all clear on who I am, you must know why I'm here, ‘Sixth Shinki’ Albertina.”

Jahar slowly raised his weapon.

This feeling was familiar. This was that which could penetrate the ScutumHoly Shield, that which could slay even the gods themselves – a celestial Dragon Fang weapon.

“This is the IgnisCrimson Flame Claymore. If you accept your impending death, then I will promise you a painless passing. It will turn your very bones to ash long before you can feel the slightest pain.”

Jahar casually brushed aside the sword that was thrust in his direction.

“No one likes a man who treats women so poorly. You must not be popular.”

His tone light, Alfred looked anything but calm. His shoulder wound was deep indeed.

“Tina’s his only target here! Alfred, please stay back!”

As she called out, Tina agonized over the fact that she lacked the energy even to heal his wound.

“When I find a girl I like, I chase her with everything I have. Popularity’s completely meaningless. —Anyway, Alfred, do you really want to do this? I attacked you just now because you were in the way, but if you just stand there quietly, I’ll let you go.”

“Unfortunately, I’m quite the coward,” Alfred laughed. “I fear that, should I do no more than spectate, Franka and Yuuki will have my head afterward. If I have to choose, I’d say I find them far more frightening than I do you.”

“That’s not even funny as a joke. —Have it your way. Allow me to teach you what fear really is.”

The sound of slicing wind——

Tina hadn’t seen any movement. She only noticed because Alfred had managed to deflect the blow.

“Really? Because I don’t see anything to be afraid of.”

The air was filled with the sound of metal striking metal in rapid succession.

“——!”

Alfred was too busy defending himself to spare a word.

Even if he hadn’t been wounded, there was an insurmountable gap both in the quality of their weapons as well as their raw strength. The disparity between their swordsmanship was even larger.

Moreover, it hadn’t taken more than the tiniest fraction of his true ability to forcibly suppress Alfred, an experienced swordsman. This, even Tina could

tell.

Alfred failed to defend against a horizontal slash, and lost his balance.

Jahar followed up immediately with a slice clearly intended to take his head clean off his shoulders. Alfred only just managed to block it.

The two held their positions, with Jahar finally breaking the silence.

“...This is such a waste of time. Do you really not have anything else up your sleeve? Well, either way you’re a dead man, so I guess it doesn’t really matter.”

He didn’t appear to have exerted any additional force, but Alfred felt the force against his sword double.

Alfred sank to one knee with a groan.

Jahar suddenly broke off the stalemate, and raised his claymore high into the air.

“This is goodbye.”

His blade came down forcefully from above with a slight diagonal slant to it.

The celestial Dragon Fang weapon easily parted his armor, cutting Alfred into two——

——Or at least, it should have.

“You——!”

Tina had charged forward.

The massive sword had impacted her body and sent both her and Alfred flying, though their bodies retained their original shape.

“Ha! How’s that? Tina stopped you!”

Tina slowly rose to her feet.

The skin on her wrists had been torn, and fresh blood flowed down her arms. That was, however, the extent of the damage she'd sustained.

"That claymore looks like it's in its first phase? It can't break the ScutumHoly Shield like that."

"...What an impulsive little girl you are. Well, it's not like I didn't know what your personality was like already."

"'Personality' is the wrong word. Try 'duty.' ——If someone in front of me is about to be killed, how could I stand by and watch it happen?!"

"And who exactly do you think you're fooling with that act, 'Serpent of Demise'?"

"...Huh?"

Tina frowned. That wasn't a term she'd heard before.

"I can't tell if you're just playing dumb or if you really haven't realized, but it's not like it matters either way. ——Your defender looks to have gone to sleep, so what's your plan now? Judging by the way you charged over here in person, I'm guessing you don't have any divine energy left."

Alfred had collapsed on the floor. He was... still breathing. Tina sighed in relief.

"Sorry to be the one to break the news, but Master's going to arrive any moment now. Why don't you rest there for a bit?"

"You have that much trust in someone who isn't even a Duelist anymore?"

"Of course. As far as Tina is concerned, he's someone far more important than any Duelist could be," Tina retorted proudly.

"..."

Jahar frowned ever so slightly, her words having disturbed him somehow.

“——That aside, know that I have no plans of merely standing here quietly and awaiting death. If I don't put my all into struggling to live then I could never hope to stand by Master's side.”

Tina's breathing was rough as she glared down her enemy.

“Even if I've used up every last bit of my divine energy, and am nothing more than a pitiful little girl, you can bet that I will fight. I will fight you to the very end. Come, Jahar! Just try and kill me!”

“...This is pretty difficult.”

Jahar sighed lightly.

“You are much, much stronger than that girl of mine who has not the least intention of fighting.”

“Hmm? Are you telling me you're not here on the orders of your master?”

“The situation's pretty complicated. It's not like there's any need for me to explain things to someone who's about to die, though. ——Let's just say that there's at least one Shinki and Duelist who have no need to trust one another. That's all you need to know.”

“Why?” Tina asked, puzzled. “That way's just too lonely. The Shinki and Duelists are both abnormal existences. That's precisely why they must cooperate and compensate for one another's weaknesses.”

It wasn't like she was stalling for time. She truly could not comprehend his reasoning.

“For various reasons, Tina has no Duelist. Things have been that way ever since Master took Tina in. That's precisely why I understand just how painful it is to be alone. To stand alone, without anyone in whom to place your trust... to be isolated from this world is terribly sad and lonely.”

“From a Duelist's perspective, we have a mission that takes priority over all else. Compared to feeling at ease, that mission is infinitely more important.”

“I notice you didn’t refute my words.”

“...”

Jahar clicked his tongue irritably.

He swung his sword. Its shape changed, growing twice as large.

Tina stepped back unconsciously, pressured by the oppressive atmosphere.

“Rather than wasting your time on idle chatter, begging for mercy would be a better use of what little time you have left. You would really trust Yuuki Takamigahara even unto death? —This is a celestial Dragon Fang weapon, you know. It has three phases, increasing in power with each shift. This is currently in its second phase, able to pierce through even the ScutumHoly Shield. Ready yourself, ‘Sixth Shinki.’”

“I don’t need you to tell me that. I will definitely survive until Master comes.”

She was afraid, to be sure. She was drenched in cold sweat and her legs trembled ever so slightly.

Though she would never admit it, even if that meant taking it to her grave.

“...You Shinki take life and death far too lightly.”

Jahar’s lips twisted in disgust.

“I’ve heard more than my fair share of hollow words and empty ideals. It’s true that peace and trust are indeed important, but what you guys need to understand is that those things lose all meaning once you’re dead.”

“I understand that very clearly, believe me.”

“Like hell you do!” Jahar roared.

Tina’s eyes opened wide in surprise.

His exclamation just now had held not the least trace of his normally frivolous tone. His true feelings had shone through for just an instant.

“——Whatever the case, all we can do is follow our convictions. That’s what Tina believes.”

“...”

Jahar didn’t answer, but he lowered his weapon, opening his mouth to speak.

“...I said something utterly unlike myself. Your stalling tactics were entirely too effective, Tina-chan. We’ve wasted enough time here, let’s end this.”

“Tina wasn’t stalling anything——”

She moved just as she finished speaking.

She retreated backward, shutting her eyes and covering her ears as she did so, drawing on every last bit of power she had remaining.

“——!”

Jahar’s eyes were blinded by a brilliant flash, his ears deafened by an explosive roar. The light filling the room made it seem as if it were midday.

As she’d been speaking, Tina had been absorbing the divine energy contained within the lantern at her feet.

——Unfortunately, even that had now been completely consumed.

The light and sound would do no more than temporarily stun Jahar. By her estimation, within the next five seconds, he’d become active once more. How should she escape...?

Tina raced away as she considered her next plan of action, but what happened next rendered her efforts futile.

A horrific surge of energy carved out a crater in the floor, sending a terrific heat into the air.

“Aah——”

Fortunately, Tina hadn't been hit directly, but finding herself standing on nothing but air, she was thrown into the ground.

Jahar hadn't bothered to wait for his senses to recover, instead attacking immediately with his IgnisFiery Crimson Claymore.

Tina executed a brilliant spin – or rather, failed to, instead tripping awkwardly. With all her might, she struggled to her feet.

The claymore's blade drew level with her eyes.

“Not bad.”

Jahar watched her, a cold, cruel smile on his face.

There was nowhere to run. Even if she could stand up, there wasn't a thing she could do to stop that enormous blade from cleaving her in two.

Instead, she looked up and, meeting his eyes, spoke.

“...There's something I want to confirm, Jahar.”

“And what would that be?”

“You just asked me whether or not I ‘really trust Yuuki Takamigahara even unto death?’ Listen, it's not ‘unto death.’ ——This Shinki, Albertina, declares that ‘even if I die,’ I trust him!”

As she spoke, she kicked off the ground. Even if just by the tiniest degree, she'd do everything in her power to stave off death. She had to survive until he came.

However, Jahar was faster than she was.

The claymore's blade pressed against Tina's tiny frame, cutting apart the ScutumHoly Shield——

“Uwa——!”

Tina collapsed onto the stone-cold floor. She’d been struck from behind, the breath scared right out of her lungs.

However——

(I’m... alive?)

Although she had indeed been wounded, the wound was shallow.

The pain caused her to stand in a hurry.

Two new figures now stood in the room.

One of the new figures, wielding a longsword as white as the driven snow, spoke.

“Any lost children here? I’m here to pick you up, Tina.”

“...You’re late,” she replied, not noticing that her sobbing had drowned out her words.

Just before Jahar’s Claymore had struck Tina, it had been intercepted and deflected by the NixSnow Blade.

Kaya’s teleportation had just barely made it in time.

“——Well, well. If it isn’t the Snow Blade King.”

Jahar shrugged exaggeratedly before turning his gaze to the young girl at Yuuki’s side.

“As well as my master, the ‘Shinki Crowned with the Moon.’ ...I thought it was bad enough that you refused to help, but I never would have guessed that you’d even betray me.”

“I-I-I said from the start... that I wanted no part of this. You teleported with the help of the ‘Shinki who Scatters the Stars’?”

“Indeed.”

“The quakes have been her doing as well, I assume? Her goal is to confirm Tina’s battle strength and condition?”

By throwing her into desperate circumstances, and by observing her actions in such a situation, she’d be able to determine Tina’s standing. The changes made to the labyrinth had been intended to isolate Tina from those around her.

“Pretty much. Even with the ScutumHoly Shield, if she were to get caught in a cave-in, she’d be unable to move. She’d be forced to call upon her reserves to prevent such a thing, this we knew. As it turned out, she didn’t have enough energy to teleport, so we used the cave-in to drain what little energy she had left.”

“The alterations to the labyrinth don’t seem to have been too controlled. What were you guys going to do if you’d failed to separate Tina and I?”

“We’d simply continue until it worked. Kaya was to draw your attention, distract you; there were many small things we could have done. I have to say, though, I never expected that girl to be so proactive about getting in my way like this. I’d originally thought she only knew how to cry off in the corner by herself, so I had the Stellar Shinki lend me a hand.”

“Jahar-san, you—— You’re more submissive to her commands than you are to mine?”

“When it suits my purposes. For the sake of victory, I’ll do anything, no matter how dirty, even if that means associating with some rather unsavory individuals.”

“What meaning is there in a victory like that...?”

Kaya closed her eyes.

Summoning her courage, she looked up and looked at her Duelist through firm, resolved eyes.

“Lower your weapon, Duelist of the Moon.”

Jahar’s eyebrows shot up in surprise.

“Whoa, whoa, how impressive. Have you come to a decision of some kind? Or has the Snow Blade King over there said something to you?”

“I——”

“Let me ask you something first. Do you really think it’s fine to lose? Even if that loss heralds your death?”

“H-How could I be fine with something like that?”

“Then what could putting away my weapon possibly do? Nothing can change the fact that the Shinki must slay one another.”

Jahar’s lips curled upward, but his smile didn’t reach his eyes.

“This should be engraved deep within your heart, right, Kaya-chan? Defeat your enemy, and seize victory. In that case, then isn’t it simply common sense to do whatever it takes to obtain victory – to slay your foes? —— Anything else can only lead to death, you know?”

“B-But...”

Kaya sought desperately to convey her feelings.

“But I don’t want to think that that’s all the meaning there is to my life.”

“...”

“During my time in the city, my time in the training school, although there have been many, many things that haven’t gone right... I’ve been happy. Even today, to learn about the labyrinth with my friends under the guidance of my seniors – I’ve been happy. I can’t even count the times that I’ve

thought how great it would be if I were just a normal person, and didn't have to play any part in today's plan. —Are those thoughts wrong? Is it a sin to live simply because I don't want to kill my fellow Shinki?"

Jahar had no answer, but neither did Kaya continue.

Silence had gripped the room.

The one to break the silence was one of the Shinki.

"Wait, wait... Does that mean that Kaya is a Shinki too?"

"You've only *just* realized...?"

Yuuki sighed.

"...Yes. I-I'm the 'Shinki Crowned with the Moon.' I'm sorry for deceiving you."

Kaya bowed deeply.

"Hmm? Why would you apologize? Tina's been hiding her true identity too, so we're even," Tina replied solemnly.

"You were nearly killed just now. Are you really alright with that?"

"You're wrong, Master. The one who wanted to kill me wasn't Kaya, but that man."

"She's right. It's not like the Shinki and their Duelists have to get along," Jahar added calmly. "I refuse to die just because my partner happens to be a pacifist. That's why, I would be most pleased if you obediently died at my hand, Serpent of Demise."

Tina frowned.

"...I thought this earlier but... What's that you said? Serpent? Tina's not _____"

“Where did you hear that name?” Yuuki suddenly interrupted.

It had been five years since he’d last heard those nightmarish words.

“Oh? You know of it, Snow Blade King?”

“...I see. The ‘Shinki who Scatters the Stars.’ It was her. You guys are allied,” Yuuki whispered. He continued, “There are five Shinki. The sixth is neither god nor goddess, but a counterfeit – the ‘Serpent of Demise.’ —— That’s what she said, right?”

“W-Wait. What do you mean by ‘counterfeit’?”

“In other words, she has the powers of a Shinki, but not the mental restriction preventing her from harming another.”

Jahar’s face twisted in a vicious smile.

“In other words, a Shinki who can use the power of miracles to kill. A being meant to bring an end to all life – a destroyer. That’s you, ‘Serpent of Demise’ Albertina.”

“Eh...”

“...”

Three different gazes settled on Tina’s person.

The one most surprised was, of course, Tina herself.

“Oh... Tina never knew...”

Out of the blue, Jahar leapt forward and gave a vicious swing with his sword.

His sword, however, was met by Yuuki’s.

“...Why are you interfering here, Snow Blade King?” the owner of the claymore asked irritably.

“You believe her words?”

“When it comes to the ‘Sixth Shinki,’ I think what she said makes sense. Either way, though, regardless of who exactly Tina-chan is, if I kill her, then the problem’s solved. Plus, I’ll get rewarded for doing so.”

“...”

“She’s completely drained right now, so I won’t find a better opportunity than this. Even with a celestial Dragon Fang weapon, if we find ourselves at her mercy one day, we’ll be the ones to die.”

With their power of miracles, the Shinki were able to singlehandedly prevent natural disasters and control the weather. This was truly a miraculous power far beyond anything humanity was capable of.

Faced with an opponent who both wielded that power and lacked the restriction against harming others, even a Duelist armed with a celestial Dragon Fang weapon could do naught but await death.

“You’re wrong! Tina’s not that kind of thing! Master, believe me, I’m——”

“I know,” Yuuki answered firmly before turning to Jahar.

“What the ‘Shinki who Scatters the Stars’ told you has some truth to it. The Serpent of Demise did indeed exist at one point. She went mad, and many people died at her hands, but... she was slain. The ‘Shinki who Scatters the Stars’ had been an eyewitness to her actions before, and thus experienced firsthand the terror of that being. However——”

His gaze turned back once more to the young girl.

“To say that Tina is her successor, the second ‘Serpent of Demise,’ is wrong.”

“And what basis do you have to say that?”

“Because I, too, have seen the Serpent of Demise.”

“...”

Jahar frowned and brandished his IgnisFiery Crimson Claymore. It seemed he didn't want to hear anymore.

“The Serpent of Demise was not simply a Shinki who ‘was capable of’ harming others – she was a Shinki who delighted in it. She had the uncontrollable impulse to kill and destroy, and giving in to that impulse filled her with pleasure. This girl, however, is nothing like that. I’ve been by her side this entire time, and have seen no sign of such things.”

“And do you think I’m just going to take your word for it?” Jahar retorted. “No, there’s something else to consider before we even get to whether or not I believe you. Why are there six Shinki? There have always been five. Always. That a sixth would suddenly appear is extremely abnormal – isn’t it only natural to come to such a conclusion?”

“...You need to consider that again, more carefully. There were always five Shinki before, but this is the first time a sixth has appeared. I assume that both the Church and all the Shinki know by now. In any case, as I just said, I and the ‘Shinki who Scatters the Stars’ have both seen the Serpent of Demise before.”

“...Huh?”

Kaya looked puzzled.

“If that’s true, then... there should only have been five who wielded the powers of a Shinki back then?”

“Exactly. ——In that case, then where was the Serpent of Demise?”

No one spoke; each person awaited his answer.

“The answer is simple. The Serpent of Demise was among the five Shinki. Or rather, to be more precise...”

Yuuki’s words were slow, and ever so precise.

“The Serpent of Demise only appears among the Shinki.”

Deep within his chest, a terrible pain gripped his heart. It was for the best, though – this had to end here.

“The Serpent of Demise does not exist as such from birth. No, what was once a Shinki gradually gives way to the being known as the Serpent of Demise. Neither her appearance nor her personality change; however, her appetites and desires do. She slowly comes to the realization that she is the ‘Serpent,’ and that destruction fills her with the utmost delight, the greatest satisfaction. It is an impulse that will not be denied.”

Her every thought would focus on death and destruction. It wasn’t just hate and anger that gave rise to such thoughts, even love and mercy would as well. This, Yuuki knew all too well.

The Shinki’s original personality would remain, but the Shinki herself would become something else entirely. This was a thing to be feared above all else, a thing to mourn above all else; something only someone close to her would ever truly understand.

“Master, does that mean...?” Tina asked hesitantly.

Ahh, that’s right, Yuuki thought. No matter how airheaded she might seem, she was no fool, nor was she without feeling.

“That’s right, Tina. She was my Shinki. And there, at the end of things, she asked me to kill her. The two from the Moon – the ‘Duelist who slew a Shinki,’ as you’ve once heard.”

Afterward, he’d withdrawn from anything having to do with the Shinki and been adopted by Boris, eventually making the city his home.

Calmly, he continued his story.

“Given her imperfect knowledge of what happened before, in the eyes of the ‘Shinki who Scatters the Stars,’ the appearance of a sixth Shinki must seem terribly suspicious.”

“...So that’s what you’re trying to say. Right now, there are five Shinki. Adding in the Serpent of Demise, that makes six. However, which Shinki is the Serpent of Demise is currently unknown.”

Yuuki nodded in the affirmative.

“My thoughts are that the existence of the Serpent of Demise is a fact of this world. When a Shinki dies, another will be born in her place after some number of years, correct? The previous ‘Shinki Crowned with the Moon,’ Muriel, was the first Serpent of Demise. A gap having been created, some few years later, Kaya was born. A few years after Muriel died, Tina was born.”

Tina counted on her fingers in confusion.

“Um... There were always five Shinki before. Now that we’ve added one, will there always be six?”

“I assume so. I’ve said it already – the Serpent of Demise arises from among the Shinki. In other words, once its former host dies, it passes on to invade another. At the moment, we have no idea who might be harboring the Serpent. I might as well add that I don’t know how much the other Shinki know. —That’s pretty much what I wanted to say.”

For a time, no one dared speak.

“—So that’s how it is.”

The first to break the silence was Jahar.

“What you say makes sense, but... it’s all still conjecture, right? You have no proof?”

“...I do not.”

“Then what reason do I have to believe you? In fact, even given what you said, the possibility still exists that what El-chan said is true – that Tina is the Serpent.”

“...”

He'd seen it coming, but it was still unfortunate that things had taken this turn.

“B-But, Jahar-san, if that's the case, then Elfriede-san has no proof either.”

“I was aware of that from the very beginning. ——If neither side has any evidence, then what should we do?”

Jahar laughed delightedly.

“Even if what Yuuki said was entirely true, we can't ignore the possibility that Tina-chan might indeed become the Serpent of Demise. Perhaps it is simply laying dormant. Although, regardless of whether she is just another Shinki or indeed the Serpent, one thing doesn't change – she is our enemy. There's only one choice left to us – to heed the command of the ‘Shinki who Scatters the Stars’ and kill her.”

“...”

“All this complicated stuff aside, let me add that I love battle, and am eager for us to fight. ——After all is said and done, there's not really any reasons for us *not* to fight, right, Snow Blade King?”

“...Perhaps.”

And, as expected, things have come to this, Yuuki thought.

“My way of doing things is pretty simple. If you refuse to leave Tina alone, then I'm just going to have to kill you.”

“Master...”

“P-Please stop! Why...”

Kaya stuttered as she spoke. Looking up, her eyes were filled with tears.

“Why won’t you listen to me? Do you really love to kill that much?! There’s something wrong with you!”

“...What a naive little Shinki you are. You don’t have the slightest concept of what it means to die.”

Jahar rejected her plea with a scornful laugh.

“O-Of course not. I’ve never died before, after all...”

“And that’s what makes the Shinki different from Duelists. ——You know what I mean, right, Snow Blade King? The weight of our lives is altogether different from anyone else.”

The Shinki pair turned to watch Yuuki in surprise.

He sighed.

“That’s right; this isn’t something you guys know. The first time she heard it, Muriel was pretty surprised as well. It’s not that I’ve purposely tried to deceive you guys, it’s just that this is something of an uncomfortable subject for me. ——Kaya, I told you before that all the Duelists are missing something, right?”

“R-Right.”

“Allow me to explain further. ——The necessary qualification to become a Duelist is indeed a shortcoming of sorts. More particularly, one’s heart must be filled with the feeling of loss, and that at the time of death. ‘How can I just die like this?!’ As our hearts and minds are overcome by that feeling, we are called forth to serve the Shinki and are bound to them.”

“Eh——”

Kaya was struck speechless.

Tina spoke in her place.

“T-Then, Master... you’ve——?”

“Died once before, yes.”

With his heart filled with the desire to live as a ‘human,’ he’d been killed by his compatriots who were still nothing more than ‘tools.’

Once before, he’d told Tina that he no longer met the requirements to be called as a Duelist. That was truthfully said, for he was still among the living.

The summoning of a Duelist was something a Shinki could only do once in her life. It was a technique that restored a life that had been lost.

“Our service to the Shinki serves also as an opportunity to satisfy the regrets that claimed us during our past lives.”

They’d be summoned to the side of the Shinki whom would allow them to do precisely that.

Indeed, Yuuki’s dream of ‘living as a human’ had been realized.

“Jahar exhibits an abnormal obsession with victory. Although I can’t say what you experienced in your previous world, it’s clear that you can’t forget your death, and the loss that led to it.”

“Yep.”

Jahar nodded.

“I was a mercenary. A rather well-known one at that, I might add. ——— However, on the battlefield one day, I lost to the might of overwhelming numbers. It wasn’t that I felt their superior numbers were unfair; no, when it comes to battle, the ends justify the means. The one who wins is the stronger one. I simply could not forgive myself for losing. That’s pretty much it.”

Jahar lifted his sword once more.

“I want to win. No matter what it takes, I want to win. And keep on winning forever more.”

“...”

“I’m sure you understand what it’s like to obsess to the point of madness, no? ——IgnisFiery Crimson Claymore, third stage release!”

The claymore once again changed its shape. Compared to its previous state, it had shrunk a little. It was quite plain, rather like its first phase.

However, the sword’s blade was now enveloped in a dense aura of divine energy.

“....Tina, please take Alfred to rest against the wall. The two of you should stay back for this part.”

His command to Tina issued, Yuuki sighed again.

“How long has it been since I last did this? ——NixSnow Blade, phase three – unleash!”



“Stop——!”

Kaya’s shout was lost amid the clash of wintry blizzard and raging inferno.

The third phase of a celestial Dragon Fang weapon – the ultimate form of those weapons which boasted the greatest destructive power.

Jahar had mentioned it to Kaya once before, but this was her first time seeing it with her own eyes.

Kaya recognized what had just happened for what it was – a demonstration of their resolve. There wasn’t anything she could do to stop them anymore.

(But...)

Even if she refused to back down now, there wasn’t a thing she could do to change things.

Kaya didn’t want to see either Jahar or Yuuki harmed, nor did she want them to hurt one another. She had no desire to watch their blood soak this battlefield.

Protecting the party during the cave-in as well as teleporting Yuuki and herself over had consumed no small amount of divine energy.

That notwithstanding, she yet had some power remaining. What should she do with it?

Suddenly, the sound of their weapons colliding disrupted her train of thought.

“Kya——”

Kaya’s tiny body was thrown into the air.

“——!”

She felt someone catch her. Tina embraced her from behind.

“A fight between Duelists is really something, huh. ——Oh wait, Master is a former Duelist.”

“How can you be so calm?! ——Tina, you need to stop them...!”

Kaya abruptly shut her mouth.

She'd noticed Tina's wan profile and the force with which her fists were clenched.

“...From the very beginning, Tina never wanted to be your enemy, nor that man named Jahar.”

With an unwavering gaze, she watched Yuuki's every action, his every move.

“However—— It is not the role of a Shinki to stand amid a blaze, focusing the heat of the blaze on her person. I am weak. I cannot protect myself. It is for that reason that Master fights so desperately.”

“...”

“If Master thinks this is necessary, then Tina can only accept his will. That is both my duty and my responsibility.”

“Re...sponsibility...?”

“I believed that Master would come, and he did. And now, I choose to believe in him once more. I can only await his safe return. But still——”

Tina laughed.

“Who knew that having faith in someone... was such a scary thing. This is my first time experiencing such a feeling.”

“...”

Kaya didn't reply.

She was nothing like Tina, neither in her relationship with her Duelist nor in her resolve as a Shinki.

——*I really am useless.*

She did not trust in her Duelist, nor was she trusted in turn. Furthermore, she lacked both power and resolve. Truly, she was worthless.

The reality before her, as well as herself, if only all of this – or even everything at large – would simply vanish without a trace!

This feeling rose from deep within her heart.

The two had already clashed more than forty times.

Generally speaking, a thin, slender blade would be faster but a larger sword would deal weightier blows.

However, in the face of these weapons and their masters which utterly defied conventional wisdom, this lost all meaning.

“——Ha!”

The heavy mass of metal that was originally sent slicing downward was instead sent flying back even faster than it had come down.

The claymore had been blocked by that thin white blade and sent back where it came.

The owner of the white longsword went on the offensive, unleashing eight strikes in rapid succession.

However, the claymore flashed at a speed that ought not be possible given its size, meeting each and every attack with ease.

Yuuki leapt backward, throwing his sword out in a horizontal sweep.

The divine energy enveloping the blade shot out in a burst, hunting his opponent.

Flames roared forth from Jahar's sword, canceling out the attack.

The two combatants traded attacks from a distance.

"Hey, hey. Let me see that legendary strength of yours."

Yuuki answered Jahar's provocation with silence.

As expected, he was strong – incredibly so. —That was his honest evaluation.

Although Yuuki's tenure as a Duelist had been incredibly short, his skills had been nothing to be ashamed of.

Yuuki spared Tina a quick glance. She was biting her lip, watching him anxiously. The intensity of her will to watch his battle to the very end shone through.

"...I give up. If you're going to have such high expectations, then I guess I can't take it easy anymore."

"Huh?"

"Hey, Jahar, I have a question for you. Have you heard the story of the Snow Blade King and Black Demon?"

Jahar frowned slightly.

Yuuki continued his story unbidden.

"After the Snow Blade King was forced to give up his position as a Duelist, Black Demon took over as his successor. He was utterly unlike his predecessor. His blade was black as night, with a heart to match."

"...And?"

“The previous ‘Shinki Crowned with the Moon’ was Muriel. I was her Duelist. Muriel’s successor is Kaya. You are her Duelist. Each Shinki may only have one Duelist in their lifetime. ——Given that, just who is Black Demon?”

“You, of course——!”

Their blades locked. Jahar took a giant stride forward.

The NixSnow Blade blocked the claymore before slashing diagonally upward. The snowy white blade once more directed a burst of divine energy at Jahar who canceled out the attack with a flaming red lotus.

“As the right-hand man of the Serpent of Demise, you killed countless people. The noble reputation of the Snow Blade King remains unchanged to this day, so that must mean you went by another name. I assume that’s what you mean?”

“Pretty much, yeah.”

——This next move will decide things.

Yuuki breathed out and held out the NixSnow Blade before him at waist-level. Its divine energy condensed into a frigid aura.

Jahar raised his IgnisFiery Crimson Claymore. Its energy, too, began to concentrate. He was preparing to receive Yuuki’s attack.

“...One last question: what do you think happened to the black blade Black Demon used?”

“Huh?”

“Figure it out. ——Come, howl with all your might, NixSnow Blade!”

“Turn it all to ash, IgnisFiery Crimson Claymore!”

The blasts of red and white crashed into one another, forming a tempest as they vied for victory.

(I can win this——!)

Jahar was confident.

Ice and fire were polar opposites, and their natures would cancel one another out. However, he still had energy to spare, and was confident in his ability to overwhelm his opponent.

“This is the eeeeeend!”

In his mind’s eye, he visualized the Snow Blade King’s form amidst the fog covering the area, and sent an enormous blast of flame in his direction.

The explosion swallowed up the Nix’s Snow Blade’s energy signature, overpowering it in an instant before dispersing.

“...How do you like that?” Jahar gasped out, panting as he scanned for any sign of his opponent.

As his vision cleared, he made out the form of a snow-white longsword thrust into the ground.

A lone sword. Where was its master——?

Just as the question rose to the forefront of his mind, the tip of a blade emerged from his chest, having been thrust into him from behind.

“Wha...t...?”



“MorsBlack Death Seax, third phase unsealed; this is Black Demon’s sword.”

Yuuki’s voice came from behind him.

He’d completely evaded Jahar’s senses. This man’s true abilities didn’t lay in his graceful swordsmanship, but rather in this...?

A specialization dedicated to a single task – ‘killing.’ An assassin’s arts.

“This is my win, claymore-user.”

“Ua...agh...”

Yuuki extracted his blade. Jahar's mouth filled with blood as he collapsed to the ground with a thud.

“——Jahar-san!”

A terrible shriek pierced the room.

Born to a prostitute, he'd left home at ten, never to return.

He'd wandered, unattached, ever since then.

Penniless, hunger had been his constant companion. He'd started off with petty theft, but it wasn't long before he graduated to armed robbery. He was good at it, too. By the time he was fifteen, hunger was a thing of the past.

Eventually, there came a time when he'd been hired by the lord of the area as a bodyguard.

The lord was a young man who'd only recently risen to the position. He might not have even been fifteen himself.

The region had been engulfed in bloody war. He'd heard that the man's parents had been lost to that very conflict.

Having run out of soldiers, he'd been forced to hire mercenaries.

The young man treated others well, and never seemed to lose his spirit no matter how dire the circumstances became.

“I'd love to enlarge these fields some more,” he'd said once, while they were on patrol. “It's food that sustains the people. As long as we can provide a stable food supply, then our people will be able to continue to flourish. Although we've already made many changes to the kinds of crops we grow, and have researched new types of fertilizer and such, in the end, these fields are the key.”

The young man laughed bitterly.

“With our lands caught in the fires of war for so many years now, protecting these fields is nearly impossible. All we can do is win, and keep on winning. —I have a dream, you know. One of these days, I’m going to establish a land where no one will ever have to go hungry.”

Jahar had thought him delusional. He couldn’t remember what he’d said back then.

However, for him, who’d always lived from moment to moment, it was the first time he’d ever thought about what the future might hold.

Moreover, he wanted to see it. The “future” that young man would bring about.

He was someone who sought to give his people an environment in which they could thrive – a true visionary. If he were to live to see old age, what wonders would be wrought!

—Alas, reality was ever harsh.

The young man’s earnest efforts had brought forth fruit... and aroused the desires of neighboring powers.

Who it was who had engaged them that final time, he had neither known nor cared.

However, on that last battlefield, the forces arrayed against them had been on an entirely different scale than the small skirmishes they’d experienced before. This time, showing how badly they’d wanted the young man’s lands, the enemy had left nothing up to chance.

Jahar had broken through the enemy ranks, and found his way back to their fortress, only to realized he’d been too late – his master had already fallen.

Lost, adrift at the loss of his master, by the time he came to, he was already surrounded.

That was his last memory.

This was an all-too-common experience on the war-torn battlefield.

At that moment, he finally understood that death meant an end to the infinite potential that was life.

Strength, effort, talent, intelligence——

(When you die in battle, none of that means a thing.)

That feeling gripped his very soul.

At the same time, his heart howled with rage on behalf of the young man whom he had been unable to protect.

That's why.

This time... This time he'd win.

This time, he'd bring his master a victory.

And a future.

“Y-Yooooooooou!”

Jahar screamed as he lifted his sword once more.

Yuuki barely managed to block Jahar's heavy, heavy strike.

The MorsBlack Death Seax in his hands was barely sixty centimeters in length.

Jahar collapsed to one knee, having spent what little strength remained to him. Blood blossomed from the wound on his chest.

His eyes, however, revealed that he had not yet given up the fight. There wasn't the slightest hint of retreat in him.

“...You evaded it just slightly, huh? You sure are one heck of a monster, you know?”

Indeed, Yuuki's one-hit-kill technique had just barely missed Jahar's heart.

“No! D-Don't move! Jahar-san! I'll heal you right away——”

Kaya raced to his side, supporting his body. Focusing, she prepared to use her powers. ——Suddenly, her expression stiffened.

“It's not... Why? Nothing's happening...”

“I'm sorry, but it's useless.”

Yuuki knew how cruel his words were, but he spoke nonetheless.

“Mors' Black Death Seax's third form's power is ‘certain death.’ —— Wounds inflicted by this weapon cannot be healed by any means – even the reversal of time.”

This had been the weapon that had stolen Muriel's life. It was the symbol of his suffering.

Yuuki had never intended to use it again, but had been unable to leave it behind. It was his other celestial Dragon Fang weapon.

“You are, without a doubt, strong. Amazingly so. In the face of thousands or even tens of thousands of soldiers, you'd be able to fight on. On that point, you're stronger than I.”

“You...”

“However, when it comes to a one-on-one duel; well, that's the stage on which I shine.”

To hone himself into a “tool” designed solely to kill, to achieve this single purpose, he'd trained endlessly.

“——Screw... you!” Jahar managed to say. “I’m... still... alive. Let’s fight once more... As long as there’s another drop of blood left in this body, I’ll fight.”

“Please, I’m begging you. Just forget it. Please, don’t move...”

Jahar pushed Kaya, nearly crying, aside, and stood.

“...The depth of your obsession is staggering. Even like this, you still want to win?”

“Of... course! We mercenaries aren’t hired for our dreams or our ideals but in order to win! Without victory, there is no meaning to our lives!”

Jahar coughed, and crimson blood stained the ground.

He didn’t seem to care; he merely wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

“Let’s con... tinue.”

He was still conscious. His arms and legs could still move. He could still hold his sword. He hadn’t lost yet.

——His feelings were clearly conveyed to another in the area.

“...I see now,” Tina murmured. “I’d been thinking that it was strange that there could be a Duelist who looked down on his Shinki so, but now I understand. In order for his *Shinki* to win, he’d do anything, even if that meant that the very person in question would abandon him. If I think about it like that, then everything makes sense. Don’t you agree, Kaya?”

“Eh...?”

Confusion reigned on Kaya’s face; she didn’t seem to have understood.

Yuuki sighed.

“This is what she means. ——Kaya, this guy has not been fighting for ‘victory.’ He’s been fighting for ‘*your* victory.’ He wants to see you live on, no matter what it takes.”

He’d failed to achieve victory for his previous master.

He’d failed to safeguard his life.

——That was the hole that lay in Jahar’s heart. The regret that had filled him even as death had claimed him.

That he stood here now, swinging his sword – it was all to dispel that regret.

“Jahar-san...?”

Kaya watched her Duelist.

Jahar gently pushed her to the side as he strode forward.

“...Are you... done? Are you... ready... to die?”

He hadn’t given up on victory. No, his eyes burned with conviction.

“——NixSnow Blade.”

Yuuki called forth his comrade of numerous battles.

This would be decided in a single strike.

She’d heard everything that Yuuki and Tina had said.

But none of it felt real.

——*Jahar-san’s obsession with victory... is for my sake?*

——*Because he wants a coward like me to live on?*

No, it couldn’t be.

How could it be?

After all, how could someone possibly sacrifice their life for *her*?

That's what she thought.

There was one thing she was certain of, though – he wouldn't stop just because she asked.

So what should she do? What could she do to end this battle?

The world was always betraying Kaya's hopes.

How many times had she dreamed of escape now?

How many times had she wished that this world would simply be destroyed?

——Ah. That's right.

The sprout of an idea germinated within her mind.

Slowly it grew, taking form.

As the thought took root, the corners of her lips lifted.

This wasn't something that belonged on the quiet, obedient child she normally was – it was a sadistic, twisted grin.

——It was so simple – she just had to destroy it all. Yes, she'd end herself and take him along with her.

“I'm... going to kill you... any moment now...”

It was clearly taking all Jahar had just to keep advancing forward.

His desperation was driven by another's need.

This was what he, once a “tool” without a will or desires to call his own, had dreamed of becoming – a human.

His actions were worthy of the utmost respect.

——And so, he’d bring this all to an end without drawing things out further.

Hesitation would be a sign of disrespect.

“...Goodbye.”

Yuuki unleashed a slash that should have taken his head clean off his shoulders.

——If it weren’t for what had also happened just then...

“Wha——?!”

Jahar opened his eyes, coughing up blood.

——There was an extra arm in front of him.

The “Shinki Crowned with the Moon” turned back to look at him.

What revealed itself to his eyes was the vision of a young girl’s smiling face.

His master’s smiling face.

“Why...?”

“Because you don’t seem to want to listen to me, Jahar-san.” With a laugh, the “Shinki Crowned with the Moon” continued, “Knowing that, though, made my decision an easy one. If you refuse to listen to me, then I just have to kill you. There’s really no need to suffer through all this; I should have just done this from the beginning. ——You’ve had it hard; it’s time for you to rest now.”

At the sound of skin tearing, Jahar looked down. A large hole had appeared in his chest.

He collapsed.

“Kaya, you...” Tina mumbled, at a loss for words.

“I’m myself, Tina-san. Eh, Yuuki-sensei, do you think I’ve gone mad or something? I’m sorry to say that things have never been clearer. ——You know, I feel pretty good, in fact.”

Kaya’s shoulders trembled slightly. The look on her face couldn’t be taken as anything other than sheer delight.

A Shinki had harmed someone. And was now laughing mercilessly.

In other words——

“The Serpent, is it...?”

Yuuki unwittingly retreated a step.

The survivor of countless life-and-death battles, he’d been struck with an instinctual fear.

(——Shit!)

Yuuki clicked his tongue.

He needed to act. Now. If he delayed even a second, and she wielded the power of miracles to attack, then any hope of victory would be lost.

“Oh my, oh my. You look positively frightening.”

Kaya didn’t appear the least bit worried by the celestial Dragon Fang weapon in Yuuki’s hands. Instead, she casually strolled up to him.

“...Are you the Serpent of Demise?”

“And what will you do if I say yes, Yuuki-sensei?”

The look on her face was utterly unsuited given her physical age, with a hint of lasciviousness.

“You know, whatever happens, it’s all okay! You know, I feel simply superb. Do you understand? I just feel so restless, like I just can’t sit still. No, there are sooooo many things to destroy! Look, like this!”

As she finished speaking, the ground before Yuuki suddenly flew into the air.

Dust filled the air, obstructing his vision. His sight blocked, the only sense remaining to him – his hearing – was replete with the sound of her laughter.

“Tina! Get over here!”

As Yuuki shouted, he took Tina’s tiny body into his arms and leaped backward.

“Master, has Kaya... become that...?”

“...”

He didn’t answer. Cold sweat ran down his back.

All it would take is a single thought and he’d perish. Did he have enough time to counter-attack?

(No——)

Could he really kill Kaya, that timid little student of his?

His hesitation lasted but a moment.

The dust gradually settled. Roughly twelve meters away stood a small Shinki – or Serpent.

Yuuki discarded his second thoughts. Kicking off the ground, he leapt into the air. Suddenly——

“Master! Stop!” Tina cried out.

A figure blocked Yuuki’s attack, countering with great strength.

“Wha——”

Yuuki struggled to maintain his posture as he weathered the blow.

His attacker had spent everything in the attack, however, and he crumpled.

“Jahar...?”

Yuuki frowned.

Indeed, it was Jahar, whose chest had just had a hole punched through it by Kaya.

“...Why would you protect her? She just tried to kill you! She’s a Shinki no longer!”

“...”

Jahar’s body shook.

Perhaps his body was convulsing from shock caused by his injuries, or perhaps he’d spent himself so thoroughly he didn’t even have the energy left to hold himself up...

Yuuki’s thoughts were, however, wrong.

“Bahahahahahahaha!”

He was laughing. From the bottom of his heart.

He gazed up at Yuuki, whom had been struck speechless.

“You sure look stupid right now, Snow Blade King. —This is seriously laughable; that you and I could be taken in this easily. Despite having the strength of monsters, we’re fools, you and I. To think that a little girl could fool us this completely. Isn’t that a hoot?!”

“Wait... what?”

Yuuki turned his gaze back to Kaya.

The girl stood a ways off.

The look on her face... was the familiar, timid, insecure expression she always wore. The look of madness from just a moment before had vanished without a trace.

“Jahar-san, why... why did you get up?”

Kaya looked at her Duelist through tear-filled eyes.

“Why... would you waste all of my effort?! If you had just quietly stayed down, then you... you could have been saved——!”

“...I never asked you to save me.”

Jahar rose to his feet once more, and turned.

The hole in his chest had shrunk noticeably, and bleeding had stopped.

“So you can use time reversal in that way...” Tina whispered.

Yuuki finally understood.

Wounds inflicted by the MorsBlack Death Seax could not be healed by any method.

For that reason, Kaya had destroyed the cursed, surrounding flesh and used her powers to heal the new wound.

Because she hadn't intended to “harm” him at all, but rather to “heal” him, the mental block hadn't affected her. This was just like when Tina had cut Selim in order to help him.

“It was... all an act?”

Her deranged language and mad laughter – it was all an act.

In other words, she'd pretended to be the Serpent of Demise based on the description Yuuki had given. Her goal had been to get Yuuki to retreat, or, at worst, to gain the time needed to heal Jahar.

Even though she knew she might have been killed for having been the “Serpent.”

(She got me.)

Yuuki admitted it freely.

Unfortunately, as far as he was concerned, the worst case scenario had just happened.

“Jahar-san, please, don’t——”

Jahar ignored her pleading, and pushing her aside, strode forward and took up his weapon once more.

Yes, as long as he still breathed, the battle would continue.

“Sorry for the wait. Let’s continue this.”

“...So in the end, nothing’s changed, huh?”

Yuuki stooped slightly, readying himself.

Kaya likely had no energy left. What she’d done just now had been the gamble of a lifetime.

If that was the case, then all he had to do was kill his enemy once again.

“Jahar... san...”

“I’ve already seen everything you had hidden up your sleeve. That you think you can still win; your arrogance is astounding.”

“Give it a try and you’ll see.”

“Yeah, allow me to enjoy this——”

“Jahar-san!” Kaya shouted at full volume, simultaneously dealing Jahar’s knee a savage kick.

It was a completely unexpected ambush. It'd been executed so perfectly that this man, whose swordsmanship had reached divine levels, could only scream pitifully before falling to one knee.

At this, Yuuki's jaw just about hit the floor.

"...Mm, I see," Tina said admiringly. "Just now, she must have thought that she'd stop him at any cost."

Kaya didn't seem to have realized it herself.

"C-Cut it out already! Why won't you listen to me?!"

"...Because I don't want to lose. Man, this really hurts."

Jahar frowned as he massaged his knee.

"Is winning really that important? ...Is it really all that important that I win?!"

"Winning is my job. —Alright, it's time for you step back now, Kaya-chan. You'll get caught up in our fight like this."

"And what are you getting so worked up about that for? This fight is between the Shinki!"

"All the more reas——"

Jahar cut himself off mid-sentence.

Because Kaya, on the verge of breaking down crying, had gripped his clothes with both hands.

"As a Shinki... this is my battle. That's why... I'm the one who gets to decide. What meaning there is in battle, what we consider victory, what we consider loss, the value of all of these things – I'll be the one to decide! That's how it has to be!"

"..."

“From the very beginning, this should have been my responsibility. But because I refused to do anything but cry, and only sought to escape the situation, you took it all upon yourself.”

Her head bowed regretfully.

“I’ve committed two sins. The first was in not realizing what my duty was. The other was in not stopping to think about what it was you needed. —— Duelists are also numbered among those whom the Shinki must protect.”

“Kaya-chan, I——”

“To me, victory is——!” Kaya ignored Jahar’s protestation, continuing to speak as if he had never interrupted, “——to live as I will. And right now, what I want is for you to stop, and I will see to it that that happens. What I want is to understand you better, and I will make that happen. *That* is victory to me. Now——”

Kaya smiled.

“Jahar-san, please protect me now and forever. That I might do as I will.”

“...”

Jahar fell silent. Finally, still kneeling, he bowed his head.

——What Yuuki saw now was nothing less than a knight, bowing before his queen.

“...What would you have me do, Kaya-chan?” Jahar asked with a sigh as he lifted his head.

Kaya turned to face Yuuki.

“How about a ceasefire? We’ll call it a draw.”

“I wonder. What makes you think I want to accept your terms?” Yuuki replied, coolly. “Even if his wound has been healed, the lost blood hasn’t

replenished itself. He is far from peak physical condition. Moreover, Tina – Kaya only healed the wound itself, correct?”



“Yes.”

The Shinki nodded.

“That means you don’t have the energy to spare to bring him back to full health. There’s nothing you can do right now.”

“Is Tina not in the same situation?”

“I am. I can’t do a thing.”

The stupidly honest Shinki made Yuuki frown.

“...Anyway, as I was saying, things are in my favor right now. I am, after all, the only one that’s completely unhindered.”

“Really?”

Kaya looked askance.

“Are you sure that I have no energy left? That’s just a guess, isn’t it, Yuuki-sensei?”

“...Even if you’re not completely out of energy, there’s not much you can do with so little left.”

If she really had more divine energy available to her, as she was implying, then she’d have chosen different methods for stopping Jahar and dealing with the cave-in.

Kaya thought for a moment and then continued.

“Then Yuuki-sensei—— My actions as the Serpent of Demise... do they really prove that I’m *not* the Serpent of Demise?”

“...”

He understood what she meant.

Differentiating between the actions of the true Serpent and someone simply pretending to be it was impossible.

The human body was terribly fragile. The tiniest hole in one's head and you were dead. If she truly was the Serpent, then the tiniest pittance of divine energy would be all it took to end his life.

He couldn't read anything from Kaya's poker face. The gentle smile on her face revealed nothing of her inner thoughts.

She was even now fighting, in her own way.

Proudly, with her head held high.

Demonstrating that she, too, was one of the Shinki.

“...Alright then. Let's call it a draw, and end things here.”

“——T-Thank you.”

As she spoke, Kaya visibly relaxed. She'd thrown everything into her bluff.

Still, it was worthy of praise——

“If you look so obviously relieved, then you reveal your bluff, Kaya. Even when you feel things are finally over, you can't give up the pretense. This was just a verbal promise, after all; it's a trivial thing to go back on one's word.”

“Oh... I-I'll try to remember...”

“Tina, that goes for you too. The heck were you doing telling her you were out of energy? In the future, please refrain from showing your enemy your hand, alright?”

“Hmm? Who cares about that – it's fine.”

The Shinki on this side hadn't the least intention of reflecting on her actions.

“Kaya aside, you never had any intention of continuing, Master. Tina knows you.”

“...”

Although the way she spoke, like she'd seen through everything, was maddening enough, the fact that she was right was even worse.

Not only had he not wanted to fight Kaya in the first place, he'd been lying about how tired he was.

“This is a pretty crappy way for things to turn out. We've wasted that much effort, and for nothing.”

Disappearing his weapon, Jahar sat down on the ground. It seemed he'd agreed to the ceasefire.

“How are we going to explain this to the ‘Shinki who Scatters the Stars’? El-chan is going to be pretty mad. ——Kaya-chan, I leave it to you. Explain all this to her, alright?”

“Eh? M-Me? T-That's...”

Kaya looked ready to cry.

Watching the scene before him, Yuuki began to consider how to deal with the aftermath of the situation.

They all needed medical care, plus Alfred had to be taken to the hospital.

Could they possibly break through the walls? Perhaps if they waited here, the rescue team would eventually find them——

“This is the Stellar Shinki's doing right? Do you have any way to contact her?”

“There's no need to do that. She's definitely been listening this entire time ——”

The two Shinki suddenly called out frantically.

“Master!”

“Something’s coming!”

Teleportation – a miracle which could only be reproduced by one of the Shinki.

“...Looks like she’s pre~tty ticked off,” Jahar murmured.

An enormous body, surpassing ten meters in length, appeared at the immediate center of the room.

Although it had to be said that its most pertinent attribute wasn’t its size.

It was a reptile which walked on two legs, with deep blue scales, vicious talons, and a tail.

Finally, it boasted an offensive power capable of penetrating the ScutumHoly Shield of Duelists and Shinki with ease.

“The ‘Azure Lake Void Dragon’...” Yuuki muttered.

It was one of only twelve legendary monsters which inhabited their world. To think that she’d even send something like this over.

She’d likely pinpointed the moment when they were all at their weakest. She clearly planned to clear the board in one go.

“To think she’d even use a celestial Dragon Fang weapon. Just how badly do you want us dead, El-chan? ——Ho.”

Again materializing his IgnisFiery Crimson Claymore, he knocked aside an incoming talon. Unable to completely reflect the force of the blow however, he was forced to his knees. The smile disappeared from his face.

Only an attack from a celestial Dragon Fang weapon’s second or third phase would be able to harm a Void Dragon.

However, the use of these weapons consumed tremendous amounts of stamina. Jahar didn't think he had it in him anymore. More than likely, Yuuki did not either.

Looking down at these pitiful humans with contempt, the Azure Lake Void Dragon opened its mouth. From deep within its throat, a blue light began to gather.

“...Its Breath is coming!”

There was nowhere to hide. Nowhere to run.

Suddenly, *something* struck the beast's right eye.

Its eye was, of course, protected by the ScutumHoly Shield, but the attack had invited its wrath. It turned to face its attacker——

“Distance, angle – all accounted for. FulgurYellow Lightning Longbow, second phase – ho.”

In contrast to the leisurely voice which had just spoken, an arrow flashed toward its opponent like lightning.

The Void Dragon howled in agony. This time, the attack had penetrated straight through its ScutumHoly Shield, and pierced directly into its right eyeball.

“...Uncle?”

“Hey.”

Alfred laughed.

“I just came to. Looks like I've caused a few problems for you guys.”

“What's that you're holding...?”

“The celestial Dragon Fang weapon, ‘Yellow Lightning Longbow.’ To be honest, I've always been more of an archer. ——Unfortunately, a second-

phase release is my limit.”

As he calmly conversed, he continued to fire off arrows – arrows which rematerialized after each shot.

The Void Dragon, however, was unperturbed by such repetitious attacks. It raised one of its razor-sharp talons and deflected his shots. Several of the arrows managed to get through, embedding themselves in its body, but as they were all in its arm, they posed no threat to its life.

“Alas, I don’t think this is doing much. As expected, it doesn’t look like I’ll be able to take it down like this. You Duelists really are amazing, I have to say – being able to do battle with a monster like this.”

“How can you still be this calm? If we don’t figure something out——”

“I have an arrangement with the person who lent me this bow. These arrows are a signal for help.”

He sure seemed to be at ease, given how he was still saying things that didn’t make any sense.

“If she’s in the area, then she’ll hone in on its energy signature and come looking...”

“I’m already here——”

From behind came a young girl’s voice, speaking in a carefree tone.

Yuuki turned to look, and couldn’t help but frown at what he saw.

“You——”

“Let’s finish this conversation later. For now, Sera, you’re up.”

Following the young girl’s gaze...

Above the head of the Void Dragon, skimming just below the ceiling of the labyrinth, a silhouette could be seen.

——To be more precise, it wasn't so much that you could "see" her there, as that she had suddenly appeared there. She'd teleported to her current position.

It was a young girl, slender as a reed, dressed in a cleric's robes.

However, the weapon she held in her hands was something no cleric could ever carry.

From the silvery hilt she held in her hands extended a chunk of metal so massive as to border on the absurd.

"——SaxumSilver Battle Pick, third-form."

Mumbling, she added the force of her downward trajectory into a terrific blow with her weapon.

Killed before it could even cry out, the Azure Lake Void Dragon was flattened by her attack; the aftermath of her strike creating a crater twenty meters in diameter.

"W-What the hell..." Jahar mumbled, entirely at a loss.

"That is one of the celestial Dragon Fang weapons, boasting the greatest destructive power among their number," Yuuki replied.

It went without saying that its master boasted an arm strength that was anything but ordinary.

"...It's been a while, hasn't it? Lea."

"As you humans count time, yeah, I guess it has. You've grown, Yuuki."

"It's already been five years since I ceased to be a Duelist, after all."

The last time these two had met, he'd been thirteen.

As they conversed, the girl who had turned a Void Dragon into a pancake walked over to join them; her Dragon Fang weapon nowhere to be seen.

“Good work, Sera. —This is my first time meeting the three of you. Let me introduce myself. My name is Lea, the ‘Shinki who Supports the Sky.’ This frail looking girl over here is Serafina. She’s my Duelist. It’s a pleasure to meet you, juniors of mine.”

“The Sky——?” Kaya yelped. “As in, the one who controls the Oath Legion with the most influence?”

“Is that really the case, Master?”

“...You had better remember something that basic. We sell Reliquia in my store, so you should at least know the relative rankings of the Oath Legions, alright?”

“If I say that Stefan Klose is one of my subordinates, then that should do it for you, right? Oh, and that guy too – there was a time he was a part of my Legion.”

Lea tilted her head in Jahar’s direction.

“...You let me in, knowing who I was?”

“Hmm? Why not? As long as they bring in Reliquia, what do I care whether you’re an adventurer or a Duelist? Of course, if you had done anything too extreme, I would have taken appropriate measures.”

“I can’t deal with this person,” Jahar’s face read.

Yuuki mirrored his sentiment, though he and Lea were neither strangers nor enemies. She was hard to handle, Lea.

She was an impossible person to read. She lived her life whimsically; anything was okay as long as it was interesting. Moreover, the speed with which her mind leaped around left others at a complete loss.

It didn’t matter whether she was your enemy or your ally – she was difficult to deal with.

“Might I inquire as to why you are here, O ‘Shinki who Supports the Sky’?” Yuuki asked.

“I’m here because someone called me here... Elfriede – the ‘Shinki who Scatters the Stars’ – has been acting strangely, so I pretended to be an adventurer and came here to investigate. Moreover, I wanted to know just how it was she knew about the ‘Sixth,’ and what she planned to do about it. —Oh, almost forgot.”

Lea snapped her fingers. In a flash, the wounds covering her body vanished.

It was a fantastic work of illusion. It would be too eye-catching were an adventurer not to bear any hints of wounds traversing the labyrinth, so she’d worked a little magic.

Serafina pretended to be a cleric for the same reasons. From what Yuuki knew of her, it was only once she laid hands upon that weapon of hers that her true nature would reveal itself. However, her physical strength, battle prowess, and judgment were a mismatch with her appearance, instead exceptional to the point of abnormality. She would, without a doubt, draw notice.

“You have eyes in the city, and yet you go to such efforts to hide your own identity?”

Yuuki noticed that Alfred smiled wryly in response to his words.

“Of course. I’m the kind of person who’s generous when it comes to myself and strict when it comes to others,” Lea admitted shamelessly. “Oh, don’t misunderstand, though. It’s not like I was particularly trying to keep tabs on you and Albertina. That you were picked up by the old man or that you picked up the Sixth in turn was simply coincidence. You guys just happened to stumble into my network, and so I took notice.”

“...’Took notice,’ is it?”

“That’s why I’m here talking to you, isn’t it? Now then, let’s get to the main issue——”

Lea smiled faintly.

“‘Sixth Shinki’ and ‘One Crowned with the Moon’ – how would you like to form an alliance?”

A hill overlooking a labyrinth entrance.

Elfriede bit her lip as she observed what was going on within.

(I’ve failed...)

Not only had she used both the Duelist and Shinki of the Moon, she’d even used up a celestial Dragon Fang weapon, and all for naught.

She hadn’t foreseen the interference of the “Shinki who Supports the Sky.” She’d originally planned on sacrificing anything and everything to see Yuuki and Tina dead, but... that wasn’t possible anymore. There was no way she could afford to make an enemy of the Sky, who possessed the greatest battle strength of all the powers.

“...Kai, we’re leaving. Back to the tem——”

“Too slow~”

Elfriede spun in the direction of the voice, her eyes widening in surprise. There stood three people.

The “Shinki who Supports the Sky,” Lea, Yuuki, and Tina.

“You should really retreat the second failure strikes. Your judgment is too slow by far, Elfriede.”

Lea’s gaze wandered over to Elfriede’s right hand.

“I see now, the Void Marquetry, is it? You seriously messed up the layout of the labyrinth and gave those poor adventurers quite some trouble, you know?”

“——How did you know I was here?” Elfriede managed to ask, at last.

She'd been watching the situation via Jahar the entire time. If she'd seen the smallest hint that her location had been given away, she'd have retreated in an instant.

“You twice performed a teleportation and were even piggybacking on Jahar's sight and hearing. After using that much divine energy, finding you was pretty easy.”

“...I see. The wisdom of the elderly, is it?”

As with human clerics, the proficiency with which the Shinki wielded divine energy varied. Lea was the oldest among the current five – or rather, six.

Elfriede slowly regained her calm.

“So, what have you come here to do?”

“We're not here to do anything.”

The one to answer was Yuuki. Angrily, he continued.

“We almost died.”

“We are, from the very start, enemies. No matter what I may or may not have done, what right do you have to complain? Anyway, my goal has been to slay the Serpent of Demise. In order to fulfill my duties as a protector of the people, I can't allow her to live.”

As Elfriede spoke, she simultaneously searched for a way out.

Lea would disrupt any attempts at teleportation. When it came to their abilities with divine energy, there was an insurmountable gap between them.

(But still——)

Yuuki didn't exhibit any bloodlust. It didn't look like he was here for revenge. *Just what on earth are they planning...?* Suddenly, the smallest of

the three stepped forward.

“This is our first time meeting, ‘Shinki who Scatters the Stars.’ I am Albertina. As there is no place for me among the temples, you may refer to me instead as the ‘Shinki that Dwells in the City.’”

“...”

“The Shinki must fight one another. That much I know. However—— To be killed without ever knowing the reason, that I cannot accept. What did you say Tina was? The... um, Ser-... ‘Serpent of Delight’?”

Tina turned to look at Yuuki uncertainly.

“What kind of happy-go-lucky apocalyptic beast is that? It’s ‘demise,’ ‘demise.’”

“Right. ——Tina isn’t this Serpent of Demise. Now that this misunderstanding’s been cleared up, I want to speak with you further.”

“...Your way of thinking is far too optimistic.”

Yuuki nodded his head in agreement with Elfriede’s words.

“But——”

The expression on the small Shinki’s face contrasted her original intent. Yuuki placed his hands atop her head and laughed.

“Right now, my job is to protect this girl and affirm her words.”

Elfriede turned back to look at Lea once more.

“A ‘Shinki who loves to kill’ is a threat to this world and its people – to us all. Do you really not understand that? Do you really believe their explanation?”

“I do!”

“They have no proof?”

“That’s not for certain.”

Lea revealed a mischievous smirk.

“Think for just a moment, Elfriede. I’m sure you can figure it out? If there’s a reason that I can be sure that this Tina girl isn’t the Serpent, then it’s because——”

“——!”

Elfriede gasped. Indeed, there was an explanation.

In other words, Lea was——

“You see? Would you like your ‘proof’ now?”

“Aaaah——”

A smile on her face, Lea advanced toward Elfriede, whom, retreating, collapsed untidily on her bottom. Lea’s divine energy began to concentrate within her——

A metallic crash echoed through the air.

Kai, having stood silently by Elfriede’s side all this while, had slashed at Lea’s neck. His blow had been met by the pure white longsword in Yuuki’s hands.

“Would you mind not scaring my master like that?”

Although his voice was calm and steady, a violent bloodlust could be felt emanating from him.

“Even if she puts up such a haughty facade, she’s really quite the coward, you know?”

“Yeah, I know. That’s why I *only* scared her.”

“Ugh, seriously! Would it kill you idiots not to cause so much trouble?!”
Yuuki roared as he blocked a second blade with his black one.

Kai’s celestial Dragon Fang weapon was the Ventus Paired Blades of Amethyst Wind. It was a pair of blades, unique for their exquisite speed.

“Why don’t we stow those weapons first? We were just double-checking, after all. —Sorry for the hassle, Yuuki.”

Slowly, Kai opened some distance between them and Yuuki, clicking his tongue, put his weapons away.

“What do you want?”

“Well, we’ve already confirmed it, right? —From her reaction, she’s definitely not the Serpent.”

“...”

Elfriede finally realized she’d just been tested, and she blushed in embarrassment.

Indeed, were she the Serpent, then she wouldn’t have shown such a unsightly display of fear.

“Still, not the least bit of hesitation from you, Stellar Duelist. Were I the Serpent in truth, then you would be dead right now.”

“Even were that the case, my duties would not change, unfortunately.”

Kai shrugged, smiling.

“It’s just death. How could I abandon my duties over something as trivial as that?”

“Kai...”

Elfriede’s eyes filled with tears.

“She is, after all, a useless good-for-nothing that no one could in good conscience abandon. Believe me, I know.”

“Oh, I see.”

“...”

Why would you affirm something like that?

Lea laughed, as if to change the mood.

“I apologize for scaring you just now. The reason I believe Yuuki is because I knew Muriel – the previous ‘Shinki Crowned with the Moon’ – from way back. More specifically, it’s because I watched her change. In other words, the Serpent is not something ‘innate’ to a person, but rather something you ‘become.’ My judgment is based on that experience. —Accordingly, potential candidates are not restricted solely to this girl alone, but rather, to all of us. That includes you, of course, Elfriede.”

“...”

“Consequently, in order to better understand what happened before, and thus, what will happen next, I need Yuuki’s experience. I can’t allow you to kill him.”

“I don’t think she’s just going to accept that, though?” Yuuki interrupted. “Even though her mouth is full of pretty words like ‘for the world and its people,’ in truth, her motivating factor is not that, but fear and hate. Logic will not overcome those feelings of hers.”

“——!”

Elfriede felt the blood rush to her head, and she stood in a hurry.

“You – What gives you the right to say that!? Five years ago, the ones who executed my entire Oath Legion were you and that Shinki of yours!”

Tina looked at Yuuki worriedly.

Yuuki's expression didn't change; he simply sighed.

"You're right. If you want me to apologize, then I'll apologize. It's not that I expect you to forgive me, or even that I think I ought to be forgiven – this isn't the kind of thing you forgive. That said——" Yuuki continued in a calm voice, "If I were again thrust into the same situation, I would do exactly the same thing. At that time, what I wanted to protect was neither this world nor its people. ——You guys don't look like you can stomach my words; that's fine, but nevertheless, those are my sincere feelings. I have no desire to go through all of that again."

"..."

"Allow me to repeat, we're enemies here. If you ever try to kill me again, I will hunt you with everything I have. It's just that I have no desire to ever see 'that' happen again; on that point, we are agreed."

"...I can't deny that."

The Serpent and Yuuki had been terrifying. Loathsome. Abominable.

However, a Shinki could not allow herself to fall victim to her passions.

Even a "good-for-nothing" had her pride.

"Good. Then let's talk. That's why I've made my way here to see you. —— In order to begin, let me ask you a question: why do you want to protect this world?"

Elfriede frowned. She couldn't understand where his question was coming from.

"The world and its people need to be protected, don't they? It's one of the duties of a Shinki."

"It's precisely this point which strikes me as abnormal. ——Hey, Tina."

"Yes, Master?"

“Is protecting the world and its people really so wonderful?”

“Of course.”

“Why would you ask something so obvious?” the girl’s expression said.

“T-That’s why it’s necessary for the Shinki to wager it all to protect it, right?”

“...Do you agree?” Yuuki asked, turning to Elfriede and Lea.

“Yep,” Lea affirmed.

Elfriede nodded her head.

“Amazing. So none of you have realized the abnormality yet?”

The three Shinki looked completely bewildered.

“Oh, don’t misunderstand. It’s not your thoughts that are strange, but rather the order of things that’s off.”

The one to reply wasn’t one of the three Shinki, but Kai.

“...The sequence, right?”

“Exactly. 《This world is wonderful》 《so it must be protected.》 Were that the way you thought, then it’d be fine, but it’s not. Your decision was made before you ever had the chance to judge the situation for yourselves. That’s backward.”

“...Can you make your explanation a little simpler?” Tina asked, dissatisfied.

“Sure. No matter how you look at it, for all of you to come into this world thinking that ‘this world is wonderful’ is impossible. You haven’t experienced any of it yet, after all. And yet, for some reason you have this compulsion to protect this world from the very beginning.”

To Elfriede, that was simply the way things were.

Was it really so strange...? She could somewhat understand his reasoning, but she wasn't convinced.

“What makes all of this more interesting still is that if it weren't for that sense of duty ingrained in all of you from the start, this world could not continue to exist.”

“That's because the Heavenly King... wants us to protect this world...”

“Then would that purpose not be better served by having all of you cooperate in leading and guiding the people?”

Elfriede could not accept his words.

“The gate to another world lying at the lowest depths of the Magna PortaGreat Gate can only be opened by a single Shinki. Moreover, opening that gate requires a tremendous amount of divine energy. That's why——”

“That's why ‘the Shinki must fight to the death’? That doesn't make sense; there should be no need to fight, right? Couldn't you simply appoint one among you to take the role? Well, that's assuming your purpose really is to save people, anyway.”

“——! I, I really do want to save——!”

“I'm not doubting that.”

Yuuki's voice was extremely calm.

“The fear and loathing you feel toward the Serpent of Demise and myself is definitely real. However, you were still very careful with how you acted on those feelings. Starting with the opening act in the city, you separated us from other adventurers, and even ensured we always had water. There's only one reason you'd expend all that effort – because you wanted to avoid harming anyone beyond Tina and myself. ——Now let me ask – given all that you are capable of, why do the Shinki need to kill one another?

Moreover, why is this world so conveniently arranged as if designed specifically for that purpose?”

Elfriede had no answer. His question had shaken her.

“The Serpent of Demise is another example. Its existence serves one purpose _____”

“It prevents the Shinki from entering into a stalemate,” Lea finished.

Her normally cheerful countenance had all but disappeared.

“It’s possible for the five to enter a stalemate by avoiding combat entirely. However, once the Serpent appears, that balance will be broken. Things will *have* to be settled. ——It seems like that’s a side-effect of the Serpent’s existence.”

“It’s not just a ‘side-effect,’ but rather that someone intentionally designed it just for that purpose. Tell me, don’t you think that this world almost seems like it was purposely designed to be a battleground for a battle royal?”

Yuuki’s question was directed at everyone present.

“The Church teaches that this is the will of the Heavenly King, but let me ask you – have any of you seen the Heavenly King? Asked him what he’s thinking?”

No one answered.

Indeed, that was what was taught as well as what the Shinki were born “knowing.”

However, not one of these Shinki had ever before seen the Heavenly King.

“I would like to ask him. Why, *why* Muriel had to become that kind of thing?!”

Yuuki did his best to control his voice, but the depths of the rage and sorrow in his heart could still be clearly felt.

When he'd been serving Muriel, he'd never really conversed with Elfriede before. The only impression she'd had of him – his slaughtering of her subordinates – had been of a vile, cruel, and emotionless murderer.

——However, she realized now that her perception of him was wrong.

“For these five years, I've kept my distance from the labyrinth and I've been thinking. Always, always thinking. I don't have any motivation in mind so grand as this world or the people around me. No, all I ever wanted was to give her death meaning – purpose.”

Tina looked at Yuuki, a strange expression on her face. However, he continued, not allowing another the chance to speak.

“——That's why, I want us to form an alliance. This is not for the sake of victory in battle, but rather to in order to reject this hateful world – an alliance to ensure that we all continue to live on.”

Epilogue

I told him.

It is not my intention to leave this scar upon your heart.

However, that I am someone so dear to you makes me incredibly happy. It is a point of pride for me. Perhaps it was too much of me to have said this.

——You are already a tool no longer.

From now on, you must live on as a “person.”

And then... the ebony knife pierced through my chest.

Yuuki interrupted his reminiscing, gazing outward through an open window.

The weather was fantastic.

The warm rays of the sun felt wonderful. Yuuki stretched and returned to work... only to notice a young girl's head, sticking halfway out of the entranceway, watching him.

“...What are you doing, Tina?”

“Um, um... Tina's done cleaning the store, and we're ready to open. I was going to report to you, Master, but you were lost in thought. ——M-Master, can I ask what you were thinking about?”

“Ah, well...”

My most bitter memory – such an answer would be pretty meaningless, wouldn't it?

“I pulled back the bandage to see how the wound was doing.”

“Y-You’re hurt? Let me see!”

Tina’s frantic expression made Yuuki burst into laughter.

“It’s okay. It’s already fine... though it’s left a scar.”

It still was anything but a happy memory, but he found the pain thereof had left him. It didn’t matter how grievous the wound, as long as you survived, time would heal all wounds.

“T-That’s good to hear. ——But um, if anything does happen, be sure to let Tina know, alright? I’ll definitely be of use to you. I know I don’t really have any divine energy, b-but I’ll definitely find a way... to help you...”

She seemed a bit awkward.

“...Are you okay? You’ve sure seemed a bit off recently.”

She’d been full of enthusiasm just a bit earlier, only to sink into a depression in an instant. Her emotional ups and downs were quite drastic.

“It’s nothing!” Tina denied.

At the meeting a few days ago, Tina had formed an alliance along with the “Shinki who Supports the Sky,” Lea, the “Shinki who Scatters the Stars,” Elfriede, and the “Shinki Crowned with the Moon,” Kaya. That said, their “alliance” wasn’t anything complicated; they’d simply called a truce. A violation of the truce would inevitably create suspicion that the party in question was the Serpent of Demise, and thus even Elfriede would temporarily cease hostilities.

Arrangements to meet the remaining Shinki had been left in Lea’s hands and was something they’d left for the future.

“You sure don’t look like there’s nothing wrong. There’s no need to hide it, whatever it is; just go ahead and tell me.”

“...That’s the problem.”

“Huh?”

“Hiding... Master, even if you say that, you’re always worrying about things by yourself, thinking of how you’re going to handle everything alone. Even the truce we formed, that was something you did. Not that I’m not grateful – I am – but... am I really not someone you can trust?”

The small Shinki looked up at Yuuki.

“That’s not how it is at all. You’ve been a great help.”

He wasn’t just saying it. He thought for a moment and then continued.

“Whatever it is that worries you, feel free to share it with me. I’ll answer as best and truthfully as I can.”

“Um, then...”

Tina looked slightly embarrassed.

“What concerns me is the thing with your former master. ——Did you really kill those adventurers?”

“...It’s true.”

This time it was Yuuki’s turn to not know what to say. However, he’d just sworn not to hide anything from her.

“After Muriel became the Serpent, we thought up many ways to control her impulse to kill.”

The simplest way, of course, was simply to allow her to kill, but she’d rejected that out-of-hand.

Their second plan had involved allowing her to indirectly experience another’s death.

Yuuki had discarded the name of the “Snow Blade King” and had set himself to ending disputes between adventurers. It was about this time that the name of the “Black Demon” began to spread.

Unfortunately, before long, this ceased to be enough, and so the two had taken to hunting Void Beasts.

Although it wasn't people that were dying, the fact that she was personally able to kill proved incredibly effective. Her mind and the impulse to destroy were constantly at war with one another, but he pushed her to kill those Void Beasts. If she were ever to kill a person, she would undoubtedly take her own life. That outcome had to be avoided at any cost.

That she had changed did not matter. All that mattered to Yuuki was that he be allowed to spend even one second more by her side.

“Alas, not long passed before something happened. —Once, we were deep within the labyrinth when we caught sight of a Void Beast. Muriel planned to unleash her powers upon it.”

It had been a huge one. Killing it would calm her impulse for quite some time. Just as that thought had entered Yuuki's mind... a party had appeared and killed the beast.

That had been Elfriede's party. On the off-chance something terrible would happen, she'd brought not just her Duelist with her, but all of her finest subordinates from her Oath Legion. They had been plumbing the labyrinth's depths looking for the finest Reliquia – the Dragon Fang Gems – as well as dispatching any Void Beasts in their way. They declared their claim over any and all Dragon Fang Gems.

Yuuki couldn't care less. The problem was that Muriel's passions had been denied an outlet.

“And so I killed the noisiest of their number. I figured if Muriel saw someone die then perhaps it'd ease things a bit.”

He couldn't have been more wrong.

The thought that “I made Yuuki kill” became the straw that broke the camel’s back.

Her powers had rampaged out of control, killing every human present. Elfriede had only just managed to escape with her life by teleporting back to her temple.

Once Muriel had regained control of herself, she had determined to end her own life.

Yuuki had taken up his black blade and killed his master.

“Her wish that I ‘live on as a person’ were her final words to me. As well as my dream.”

“And that dream... has it come true?”

“Yes. She taught me how to laugh, what happiness was, how to help others – as well as the pain of loss. The pain that wracked my heart as I took her life was the final proof that I had indeed become ‘human.’”

He laughed, but the laugh never reached his eyes.

“She really was someone precious...” Tina murmured.

“Anyway, what happened after that you know. Old Man Boris picked me up, I entered the training school, and lived as I do now.”

Monstrous power, priceless Reliquia, even celestial Dragon Fang weapons had lost their meaning. Aside from the MorsBlack Death Seax, the symbol of his sin, he had discarded it all.

“I had originally planned on simply living like this for the rest of my life.”

“...’Originally’?”

“My plans have changed thanks to the appearance of a certain someone.
——Anyway, let’s open shop.”

Yuuki tussled the small Shinki's hair and made his way to the store.

"Good morning."

Franka was visiting as usual.

"Good morning," Yuuki replied in turn.

"...Did you two have a fight?" Franka asked, looking at Yuuki and Tina's expressions.

"Franka!"

Before Yuuki could answer, Tina threw herself at Franka with tear-filled eyes.

"The opponent's too much. I lost without ever having a fighting chance. And I feel worse and worse. What do I do? What do I do?"

"Ah..."

Franka sighed.

"I get it now. ...Accepting everything takes an open heart, hard as that may be."

"I have no idea what you two are talking about, but getting along as you do, you sure look like a pair of sisters."

At his words, the two looked at him with complicated expressions carrying just a hint of reproach.

During the incident a few days before, Franka had brought Selim and Edgar safely home. She'd run into her brother, whom had been investigating the situation, and he'd seen them home.

"By the way, I ran into Nii-san on the way. He's apparently decided to form a new party and continue his work in the Legion."

The siblings had once walked different roads, but that gap seemed to have closed just a little.

“It seems like he’s run into a bright young girl and a quiet one. A support specialist and a cleric, I think? I introduced them to this store, so you might meet them later on.”

“I’ll keep an eye out, but I don’t expect too much,” Yuuki replied with a bitter laugh.

Recently, their store had had some new customers.

Edgar and Selim visited whenever they had free time. That said, they only came over to play, and never bought anything, so it was hard to call them customers.

Next were Kaya and Jahar. He’d formed a pact with them aside from the truce. Jahar would bring Reliquia and Yuuki would share intel with them as well as advise them on how to deal with the other Shinki, forming a united front.

When it came to Kaya’s relationship with her Duelist, she was as polite as ever though she now seemed capable of making her position known. Her former cowardice had not reappeared. Jahar, on the other hand, didn’t seem to know what to make of Kaya now. Indeed, it seemed her sneak attack and the hole she’d left in his chest had left him with a healthy respect for his master.

Alfred was the same as always, and came and went as he pleased. Even now that his identity as an observer had been exposed, he hadn’t changed in the least. Yuuki wasn’t sure if he was just slow or if he just really didn’t care. That said, Yuuki had no intention of blaming him for anything, and so it didn’t matter.

Tina conversed with Franka as she organized the store inventory.

Yuuki had noticed how she couldn’t help but compare herself with his former master, Muriel.



He pondered inwardly whether he should tell her that there was no need for such things. He was pretty sure that she wouldn't listen if he said as much, though. What should he do?

He'd never had to worry about such things during his time with Muriel. His relationship with Tina was quite different. It was pretty unfathomable.

(——"This Shinki, Albertina, declares that 'even if I die,' I trust him!")

Yuuki thought back on Tina's words.

She had likely noticed that he'd overheard her. It had been thanks to that sentence that he'd finally managed to free himself of his tortured past, and had had the resolve to once again take up that which he had once sealed, the MorsBlack Death Seax.

Muriel had been his savior. And now, with great force, Tina dragged him ever forward.

When a Shinki died, another would be born in their place. When the Serpent of Demise perished, another took its stead.

What had caused such a situation?

Was there another path that bypassed all this death?

This, above all else, he wanted to have made clear. In order to repay those two.

"Master! The price tag on this sword's fallen off – how much is it?"

"Give me a moment. I'll take a look."

Yuuki made his way to the side of Tina, gesturing exaggeratedly, and Franka, smiling faintly.

Yuuki Takamigahara was unable to protect this world. However, from the bottom of his heart, he wanted to protect this scene.

The difference between a “tool” and a “person” came in whether or not you could feel pain.

Yuuki wished to never again have something stolen from him by this system that had been constructed by some unknown force, and operated for some unknown reason.

And so... with these two hands, he'd change this world.

Afterword

Hey everyone, this is SUEBASHI. This is the end of “Samayou Shinki no Duelist” volume two.

So... I’ve already recorded my commentary on this story in the afterword for volume one, so what I’m going to write now is a little random.

When you’re an author, the majority of your time is spent in front of a desk, writing.

Accordingly, the natural enemy of those with this profession – or perhaps I should call it an occupational hazard – is back pain.

To be honest, back pain is something I’ve had to deal with for some years now; when it’s bad, I can’t last even five minutes sitting. Although exercising those muscles and calisthenics does help somewhat, when it’s bad, and when a deadline is coming up, I don’t have the time to exercise as I’d like.

And so I decided the answer is my chair. I am, after all, spending half of every day on my chair, and so you could say the ergonomics of my chair play a very important role in lightening the burden on my body.

In other words, “a good chair will alleviate the pain,” and so I’ve been doing some research... But these things are just so expensive! Among their number are chairs that are priced at some hundreds of thousands of yen; there’s no way I could make a casual purchase of that kind.

Plus, from my point of view, the fit of these things is very important, so it’s necessary to give them a try in the store before making a purchase.

Anyway, that gave rise to a certain problem.

Because I’m pretty much a shut-in, my people skills are awful.

When you go to buy new clothes, for example, the store attendants always find you right away. It's a hard situation for me to deal with, and it leaves me panicking.

Attendant: "Welcome."

Me: (Crap, they came.)

Attendant: "What kind of clothes are you looking for?"

Me: "Uhhh, um, yeah."

Attendant: "Hmm?"

Me: "T-t-t-the kind you wear..."

That's the kind of useless gibberish you'll hear from this man.

That's why I need to prepare for just such a situation when buying a chair.

So I roleplay these things in my head before I ever take action.

I need a clear image of what I want to buy, so that I can provide an accurate description of what I want. That's way, when face-to-face with a store attendant, I can help them do their job even through my nervousness. You have to smile, personably and friendly.

——Good, I think I've got it. Something like this.

Attendant: "Welcome."

Me: "Hehe..." (Smile.)

Attendant: "Can I ask what it is you're looking for...?"

Me: "Hehe... well, I'm looking for something that will help my back, how do I put this, my lower back, feel more comfortable. Hehe. Something that will gently and comfortably envelop me, something that will suitably excite me...hehehe."

——Oh man, that's not good. They'd call the police on me for that.

What to do... (Not what to do about the police, but rather, how to deal with the store attendant. Let me just add that on the off-chance someone misunderstood.)

Anyway, to wrap the story up, I successfully purchased a new chair.

If you want to know how the attendant reacted, well, in the end, even as I paced around the store, no one paid me the least attention – I'd worried for no reason. Furniture salesmen seem to be pretty hands-off about things... That's how things strike me anyway, as I sit in my new chair, writing this.

My back is doing much better.

And finally, acknowledgments.

Thanks to a level up in my procrastination skills, it was tough going making headway on this manuscript. It's hard to express just how grateful I am to those who helped me.

I'm so grateful to the staff at Fujimi Fantasia Bunko, the editorial staff, my illustrator – H₂SO₄-sensei, designers, printers, logistics, bookstore staff, and everyone who took part in the process of this book's release. Allow me to now express my sincere and heartfelt gratitude.

I hope we'll see each other again.

October 2013 – SUEBASHI Ken

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